Sangfroid

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Sangfroid

by proser

Summary

Hannibal steps in to rescue Will when he's given a date-rape drug. Courtship ensues.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

Chapter 1

"Do you wanna get out of here?"

The guy that's been talking to Will all night—Jacob, he recalls from their introduction hours earlier—leans closer, practically falling off his stool. His hands are still wrapped around his second beer of the night, and this one he's been nursing for the past two hours. It's flat, and in the bluish light of the bar, looks far from a normal amber color.

It would be an overstatement to say that Will wants to "get out of here"—just not with this guy.

It would also be an overstatement to say that Will knows what he wants in the first place, but that's a general issue.

Will came to the bar to get drunk, but hasn't really been able to, with this sleazeball talking him up all night. He hasn't been able to chase him off, and there's not exactly many people in the world who'd think to jump to the rescue of a mean-looking young man like Will.

He'd like someone to come to the rescue; despite his resting bitch-face and general rude demeanor, it turns out he's not great at fending off weirdos like this. He's all nervous, frozen. He feels like he has to play along with the game—the whole banter-and-sex game, the former of which he's only ever been comfortable with.

He shrugs at Jacob and looks down at his empty glass. He's only had a few fingers of whiskey tonight; again, he's had to watch his consumption, with Jacob practically hanging off of him and all.

Jacob is clearly trying to stay sober, and Will wouldn't want to give him that advantage.

But Jacob notices Will's wistful glance at the glass and takes it for something other than what it is. He grins, and says, "Well, we can loosen you up before we go, then."

He raises a hand to get the bartender's attention—a different one than the girl that's been serving all night. Will isn't sure when there was a shift change, but he's guessing it was recent.

He's been a little too jittery for the past hour to pick up on anything but Jacob's sly touches and seamy remarks, and the intrusive thoughts jumping in between those have been pretty damn distracting.

He can't help those thoughts, and usually he'd try to block them out, but right now they're serving as a coping mechanism.

If he can't actually get Jacob to leave him alone, he can at least intermittently calm himself with a fantasy where he digs into the creep's chest with a carving knife.

The bartender raises his eyebrows at them, still in the middle of making someone else's drink.

"More whiskey for this one," Jacob says, and winks at Will.

Will smiles nervously at the bartender, and hopes that he can see the plead behind his eyes, hopes that he'll take sympathy and realize that Will does not want to live in a reality where he has to go home with this other man.

But the bartender just blinks, nods, and finishes making the other person's drink.

Before he gets started on pouring a new glass of whiskey, Will's hands start shaking for the third time that night. He stuffs them in his pockets and glances up at Jacob.

"I'm gonna run to the bathroom," he says.

Jacob smirks. "You freshen up, sweetcheeks."

Will slides off the stool and tries to fight the shiver riding up his spine. He hasn't used the bathroom all night, partially for safety purposes, but now he's doing so because it might provide a means of escape.

As he hurries to the men's room, he glances over the rest of the bar. It's not exactly crowded enough for him to slip out unnoticed, despite the hour, and he can feel Jacob's eyes boring into his back.

He swallows, the corners of his eyes stinging a little, and enters the bathroom. He knows that there's no window there he can climb out of, but as he splashes water on his face, he tells himself that there is.

He could use the comfort of that thought, to tell himself that he's going back in there by choice, that he *wants* to go home with Jacob. If he can convince himself of that, this whole deal would be so much easier.

He wishes he could just leave, just walk out the door, but he can see in the way that Jacob's been watching him all night that he doesn't intend to let Will go home without him.

He wishes to god that his friends weren't out of town on spring break, that he hadn't been stupid and lonely enough to decide to go to a bar in the first place.

But he knows he couldn't have anticipated this. It's never happened before, not really, and he knows that this bar isn't exactly a seedy place. There just happened to be one perv in the crowd, and he latched onto the socially-inept and emotionally disadvantaged Will Graham.

He rubs at his face with the coarse paper towel, realizing too late that it'll only make his face look red and splotchy.

Does he really want to look weaker than he already is?

He re-enters the bar, and Jacob is watching him with hungry eyes. There's no way in hell Will could go for the front door without Jacob going after him.

It's easier to play along. Safer.

Will returns to his stool and takes the glass of whiskey. His hands are still shaking, but maybe the whiskey will help. If this is all inevitable, maybe it'll be easier if he's got some alcohol numbing him.

He takes a quick swig. It tastes off, burns a little, but he swallows it anyway. He sets it down, and it hits the surface of the bar with more force than he was expecting.

Jacob raises his eyebrows and looks between Will and the glass. That only makes him more uncomfortable.

"You good, hotcakes?" Jacob asks, tilting his head.

Will nods. "Fine," he says. "Just peachy."

The sarcasm is either lost on Jacob, or he simply doesn't care. Either way, Will figures it doesn't matter how *he's* feeling about the situation.

They sit in silence for another moment, and Will is painfully aware of Jacob's leering. The sensation crawls over him like millipedes on the bottom of a dead log: repulsive, but natural. Unavoidable.

Briefly, he pictures Jacob's body dead on the forest floor, rotting like a fallen log. Thousands of leggy critters crawl from his eyes and mouth as his flesh disintegrates into the earth, and Will stands over him, mimicking the unsettling stare.

He raises the glass to his lips a second time in an attempt to flush away the vision, but before he can drink from it, someone's gripping his wrist.

Will looks up quickly. It's the bartender, who makes direct eye contact with him. He can't look away.

From what sounds like very far away, Jacob's voice raises, but Will can't make out what he's saying. He feels frozen, and he's still locking eyes with the bartender.

It's probably just the already-weird lighting of the bar, but he swears the guy's irises are tinted maroon.

The barkeep forces Will to set down the glass and lets go of his wrist, and it all feels kind of foggy and unfocused. Will processes Jacob's angry voice next to him.

"What the hell?" he demands. "Let the guy have his drink, for fuck's sake."

Will finds himself staring down at the glass, and he realizes (quite absently) that he's been drugged. Judging by how quickly it got to him, he's guessing it's ketamine.

He should be more disappointed in himself, but everything feels too surreal for him to process it.

"Ordinarily, I would," the bartender says, "but you've altered it, and I can't let him drink any more of it in good conscience."

Will wants to laugh at how proper he sounds. His accent, rich and European, is more surreal than anything else. He's reminded of distant lunches on lavishly manicured lawns with his mother, listening to posh voices like that.

He feels Jacob's hand on his arm, rough and demanding.

"I didn't put jack in his drink," he snarls, and then turns to Will. "Right, sugar?"

Will can't answer, and he wouldn't even if he could. The *sugar* coming from Jacob's lips is grossly saccharine, like the kisses from girls of spoiled southern lineage he remembers from his preteen years. Entitled, expectant, wanting, and inconsiderate.

They always wanted their hands on Will back then.

Will Graham, the blue collar country boy turned nobility, turned *novelty.* Something to toy with, to tease.

He warded them off soon enough, with a lack of civility that bordered on threatening rather than cute. He remembers sitting through their company just as he sat through Jacob's: imagining their skin rotting away, with bones as exposed as their ugly nature.

The barkeep crosses his arms, and Will doesn't see him without his flesh. "We have security cameras," he says pointedly. "I won't tell anyone to look into the footage if you leave immediately."

A strong wave of heat and anger bursts from Jacob, but he gets off the stool anyway. "Fuck you," he growls, and makes his way for the door.

Will doesn't watch him go, but doesn't bury himself in his thoughts, either. Without his noticing, his head is somehow now in his hands, and he's no longer shaking.

He might throw up, though. He's not sure if it's from the relief or the drug, but either way, he has no actual grip on reality right now.

He barely notices as the bartender takes his drink away and hands him a tall glass of water.

"Stay here, okay?" he asks, and his voice is softer than when he spoke to Jacob. "Wait until the drug wears off, and then we'll see about getting you home."

A sound comes from Will's throat, and he nods. "Ketamine," he says, unbidden. "Should be gone in a half hour. I'll be fine."

It probably doesn't sound as convincing or as stable to the barkeep as it does in his head, but the other man smiles at him regardless. His head cocked to the side, he asks, "Do you get drugged often?"

Will figures he should tell him that, no, this is a first, he just knows a lot about chemicals and the body from school, but he just takes a gulp of water instead.

The bartender continues working, keeping an eye on Will.

Will is too busy imagining—seeing?—Jacob's face rotting away into the forest soil to care.

Not long after, things start to feel normal for Will. He notices that his limbs are suddenly much easier to control, and sounds are much less muted.

Reality slides back to him, and he's grateful for it.

He blinks and looks up, realizing that the bartender is just across from him, watching intently as he cleans out a glass.

"Hi," says Will. It's not an entirely appropriate thing to say, but it's not harmful, either.

"Hello." The bartender looks idly amused, which probably isn't an appropriate reaction, either, but Will lets it slide.

"I'm feeling more like myself again," he says, and pushes the empty glass of water away. "Thanks for saving me back there. I'd been suffering all night."

A headache is beginning to pulse at the back of his skull, but at least he's ridden out most of the effects of the drug. He does feel much better now.

"Suffering is an understatement," the bartender returns, pursing his lips. "I would have done something sooner, but I was busy with a patron. I didn't notice that he had spiked your drink before it was too late."

Will nods and lifts a hand to rub at his temple. Grimacing at the tension there, he says, "How'd you know, anyway? *I* couldn't tell."

"You didn't seem entirely coherent in the first place." The bartender sets down the glass he's been working with a cloth and takes the empty one that Will had drank water from. Hesitating for a moment, leaning against the bar, he adds, "But, to answer your question--I smelled it."

Despite his eyebrows raising, Will doesn't question it.

"Well, thanks." He offers a weak smile, exhaustion pulling at him. "But I should head home, now that it's safe to scram." He gets off the stool and tries to ignore the fact that he's still pretty damn shaky.

The bartender blinks.

"Your assailant could be waiting for you outside."

Will frowns and glances over his shoulder, tries to subtlety stable himself by placing a hand on the stool. "Still?"

Shrugging, the barkeep says, "I'm familiar with men like him. They don't give up easily—especially when angered."

"Really?" Will asks, thinking of all the cases he's had to study in criminal psychology classes. "I wouldn't think they'd have that much integrity."

The bartender smirks, an expression that's barely even there. "Do bears have integrity?" he counters. "I would personally consider them intellectually incapable of such a thing, and yet they will kill a man if provoked. It is their nature."

"You think I've provoked a dumb, angry man?"

"I think that *I* have," the bartender corrects him, "and I feel responsible for your safety because of it."

Will wants to sigh, wants to protest, wants to act like he's strong enough to take care of himself, but he's actually grateful. It's been a long, stressful, even scary night, and the thought of someone looking out for him isn't that bad.

"You're still working, though," he notes. As shaky as he is, he can't make the only barkeep in the joint abandon post.

"I can inform my superior of the situation." He glances around the rest of the room before his gaze falls on Will again, scrutinizing. "Besides," he adds, "things are quiet."

Will turns his head and notices that the entire place is empty, save for a lone man by the dart board and a pair of women slumped over half-empty pints of beer. He hadn't noticed the place clearing out when he was recuperating, he supposes.

"You sure?"

The bartender nods, his eyes focused on Will with an earnest expression. "I fell inclined to prioritize your well being."

Will feels his cheeks heat up and turns away. He's not used to random strangers caring so much, but it's nice.

He just hopes there aren't any strings attached.

The barkeep starts to clean up, and the remaining customers seem to notice. The man quietly slides out the door, and the women bring their drinks back to the bar.

"Closing up?" the one with the darker hair asks.

"Yes," the bartender replies, taking her mug. "Do you mind? Margot and yourself usually aren't here so late."

The other girl—Margot, presumably—slings an arm around the first. "We're allowed to have fun, Hannibal. Don't judge."

Will somehow isn't surprised that the bartender would have a name as weird as 'Hannibal,' given his posh dialect and posture. He wonders why a guy like him is doing serving drinks at a mediocre bar like this.

He *does* look young enough to be a student, so he might just be working to pay off loans, but still...

Hannibal, the barkeep, smiles at them. "Have fun somewhere else, then. I have to take this one home." He nods over at Will.

The darker-haired girl gives him a curious look, but it's Margot that speaks, her voice a stage-whisper.

"You gonna get some, buddy?" she asks him, waggling her eyebrows.

The other girl elbows her. "Come on," she sighs. "You're drunk. Let's get going."

"But *Alana,"* she whines, leaning her face close to her companion's. "Hanni never tells us if he ever gets laid. Don't you want to find out?"

Alana rolls her eyes. "You know not to call him that." She glances back at Hannibal. "And I know for a fact that he never gets laid, so let's go." She grins at him. "Good night, Hannibal."

Hannibal takes the (albeit friendly) verbal abuse in stride and smiles fondly as he wishes them a good night. As they leave, he double checks the bar and pulls a set of keys out of his pocket.

"Thank you for enduring them," he says, approaching the door. "I just have to lock up here. Bedelia will take care of the rest."

Will yawns, and doesn't bother asking who Bedelia is. He follows Hannibal out, watches with drooping eyelids as he locks the door.

Damn, he's tired. He checks his phone and realizes that it's approaching one in the morning.

Hannibal finishes with the door and addresses Will.

"Did you come here in your own vehicle?"

Will shakes his head. He took the bus, as always. He doesn't have a car.

Not because he can't afford one, but because he doesn't feel comfortable spending that much of his mother's tainted money. He does his best to support himself.

"I thought not," Hannibal replies. "We can take mine. Do you mind?"

"Not really," Will answers. "You're all I've got at the moment, pal."

Hannibal smiles, and Will would have thought it sheepish if not for the man's confidence. "Fair enough," he says. "Come with me."

He leads Will a little further down the street, where a black car, half-lit by the orange-tinted street, light waits for them. Will doesn't pay attention to the make or model, but as soon as he climbs into the passenger seat and feels the plush leather, he can't help but think it's a luxury vehicle.

When Hannibal turns they key in the ignition, Will doesn't have to feel the leather to know. He knows cars, and this one sounds like a very expensive engine.

"Where to?" Hannibal inquires.

Will scratches at the back of his neck nervously, suddenly self conscious. He has a crappy apartment at the edge of the university district. He usually doesn't care about what people think, let alone what people with *money* think, but he realizes he doesn't want to find out that Hannibal is one of those rich assholes that looks down his nose at poor people.

He forces himself to stop worrying and get over it.

"I live on Barclave Street," he says, squeezing his eyes shut for a second.

Hannibal simply enters the destination into the GPS system built into the car, and they begin driving.

It's silent for nearly half of the ride. Will doesn't mind it; it's refreshing, after what he endured for the earlier majority of the night.

But as much as he enjoys not talking, he's at least sort of intrigued by this good samaritan, if not slightly worried about his motives. He asks his question while continuing to stare out the window.

"What's your deal, anyway?"

He doesn't sense any strong reactions, and he doesn't bother looking over to check.

"What do you mean?" Hannibal asks, his voice steady. "Are you asking why I'm helping you?"

Will shrugs and then looks at him. "Sure," he says. He's kind of wondering what Hannibal's deal is in general, with the car and the accent and everything, but that might be rude to say.

"I'm obligated to assist my patrons."

Will huffs at that. "Most people in the service industry would beg to differ."

And Hannibal laughs, and it's as subtle as his smile (less of a laugh and more of an amused hum), but he doesn't respond to the remark.

Still not wanting the conversation to be over, however, Will keeps staring at him. "It's Hannibal, right?" he asks, though it's completely rhetorical. He hasn't forgotten.

Somehow, that earns a smile. "That would be my name, yes," he answers. "Though, I haven't picked up on yours—and I'm assuming it isn't any of the pet names your scum companion assigned to you."

The disdain in his voice simultaneously frightens and pleases Will.

"My name's Will," he says, and turns to look ahead of them.

He catches Hannibal glancing over at him, smiling, from the corner of his eye.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Will."

The rest of the ride is shared in silence. Will tells him which way to turn on Barclave, and instructs him to stop when they pass in front of his building.

Hannibal takes the keys out of the ignition, and the engine stops. He opens his own door, and Will freezes.

"Oh—you don't have to—"

Halfway out of the car, Hannibal stoops to look at him, eyebrows raised. Without responding, he gets out, shuts his own door, and crosses in front to Will's side.

All the while, Will's heart is hammering, and he feels frozen. A small, unhelpful voice in the back of his head whispers, *Out of the frying pan, into the fire.*

Maybe Hannibal's motives for rescuing him from Jacob weren't so noble.

Maybe he's just another entitled shit, here to poke at strange little Will.

He takes a deep breath as Hannibal opens his door for him, and he can't help but appreciate that at least he's a gentleman. Getting out of the car, he glances anxiously towards the building.

"Thanks," he says, keeping his voice steady.

"You're welcome." Hannibal gives him a smooth smile. "Would you like me to walk you to your apartment?"

Will's stomach sinks. This is what he had been afraid of.

"No, thank you," he says, and he's surprised that he's even able to say it. After everything he had put up with Jacob, he can't believe that he's able to say no so easily.

Still, he expects Hannibal to insist, to follow him up anyway, to pin him against a wall and have his way, but he doesn't.

The smile persists, still warm and charming.

"Have a good night, Will. And be more careful next time; I wouldn't want this happening to you again."

Will smiles, a relieved and shaky exhale escaping him.

"I'll try my best."

Hannibal nods, and Will hurries into his building. He glances over his shoulder as he waits for the elevator and sees Hannibal driving away.

His throat goes dry as he realizes that Hannibal drives a *fucking Bentley.*

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Spring break passes uneventfully, and Will's small collection of friends return from their exciting vacations.

He's almost—*almost*—forgotten about everything that happened at the bar, but he's not really one to repress unpleasant memories, as nice at that option sounds.

Sunday night before classes resume, his best friend, Beverly, has dragged him to campus to join their friends Jimmy and Brian in their dorm room for pizza, beer, and Jurassic Park.

He's okay with that, but only because the three of them don't have any other friends besides each other, which guarantees that the evening will be peaceful.

Plus, he's always been a sucker for Dr. Grant. Beverly teases him about his weird crush on the archaeologist during the walk from the bus stop to the dorm.

"I mean, not to be rude, but... that screams *major* daddy issues," she jests. "Any normal person would agree that Jeff Goldblum's character is Jurassic Dream Daddy Number One."

"No way," he says. "He's too... pessimistic. Snarky, too."

"Oh, so like you?"

They go back and forth like that until they get to Jimmy's and Brian's room, where they can hear the guys bickering about something. They've probably already claimed the couch, which is a lumpy loveseat they got off of Craigslist for forty dollars their sophomore year. It's probably seen more tragedies than the four of them combined, and smelled like gasoline for months until Will had patted the whole thing down with baking soda.

It's not the greatest thing in the world, but it's the most comfortable spot in the room. They both know what has to be done.

Sharing a look with Beverly, Will knocks three times. Beverly sets down the six-pack of beer she's carrying.

Brian answers the door a moment later, poking his head out, looking grossly triumphant.

"Jimmy and I called the couch, so don't fucking pull anything, okay?"

Beverly pounces then, busting open the door and knocking him to the ground. Will charges for Jimmy, and, using his surprise as an advantage, knocks him off of the sofa.

He keeps his legs over Beverly's spot until she dives into it, crushing him. He winces from the impact, but they know they've won an important battle.

"Oh, come on," Jimmy wails, lying on the ground. "I'm glad we preemptively ordered olives on the pizza. That's your punishment."

Beverly snickers, and Will knows it's because she secretly loves olives and continues keeps that a secret for this exact scenario.

Dejectedly, Brian grabs the beers that Beverly left in the hallway. They divvy up the drinks and the pizza and settle in to watch the movie together.

Will sinks himself into the crease of the sofa, glad he won the spot, because Jimmy is next to him on the floor and is already shifting uncomfortably. He's guessing that Brian is suffering, too, because he goes and grabs a pillow from his bed to sit on, tossing one at Jimmy while he's at it.

Seats and squabbles are quickly forgotten, however, outshone by the glory of the Brachiosaurus and the dramatic power of the Tyrannosaurus Rex.

Occasionally, one of them will complain about the velociraptors' lack of feathers, and the rest will chime in to agree fervently, but commentary is otherwise avoided.

By the end of the film, Jimmy is trying to sing along with the (lyricless) closing theme.

"Shut up, Price," Brian groans. "You're the only one drunk enough for that."

Jimmy responds by wailing "I'm not even that drunk" in tune with the dramatic instrumental. Brian gives up and plugs his ears, and Beverly, who has settled her head on Will's lap, reaches for the remote to shut the TV off.

When his song has cut out, Jimmy whines in protest, but quickly resigns to taking the last piece of pizza.

Beverly pushes herself out of Will's lap and sits up straight. Yawning, she says, "Well, Brian, how was losing your dinosaur virginity?"

Brian's lip curls. "Please don't call it that."

"Why?" Jimmy slurs around a mouthful of cold crust. "Because it makes you sound like a dinosaur fucker?"

"Please don't." Brian squeezes his eyes shut.

Will bites his tongue, knowing that his friend's fate has been sealed.

"Oh, come on," Beverly cries, laughing. "How would you rate your first time with dinosaurs, Brian? Really, be honest."

"You're ruining a perfectly good film," he groans.

"So, you *are* a dinosaur fucker?" Jimmy cackles.

Brian groans again and throws the empty pizza box at his face. Beverly snickers some more, and Will yawns.

"Leave him alone," he mutters, throwing an arm over his eyes. "We've barely been back together for a few hours and you're already bullying him."

"Yeah," Brian huffs. "Why do *I* have to be the victim?"

"It's the food chain," Beverly replies. "You're the compy of our friend group."

"No, no," Jimmy counters. "Compsognathus are actually very vicious! Like little scaly chihuahuas."

For the next ten minutes, that continues, derailing further into nonsense. Will just holds back and sips at his beer. He knows they're all having fun, even Brian, but he can't always handle the noise.

It's Jimmy who notices first, after Brian shouts "You guys aren't even making sense anymore!" and Will flinches.

"Uh oh," Jimmy says. "Graham clam. Chill out, everyone."

Will purses his lips and nods. 'Clam' is their code word for when Will's feeling overstimulated; they usually only have to use it in public. He appreciates it more in private, though. It just shows how much they care.

Brian ducks his head, his cheeks going red. Beverly winces and gives Will a conciliatory glance.

"Sorry, kid."

Will shrugs and smiles half-heartedly. He's just about fallen completely into the crease of Brian and Jimmy's shitty sofa, and he pushes himself out of it.

"That's alright," he says. "Could have used some clams when I was out and you all were away, though."

Immediately, his friends look concerned.

"Did something happen?" Brian asks, his brows knit together.

"Not really." Will crosses his arms. "Some creep harassed me all night at a bar and slipped something into my drink." The millipedes come back to mind just at the thought of it, Jacob's decaying body filling his head.

He shoos the thought away quickly. He tries not to let those thoughts pop up when he's around his friends.

"Fuck." Beverly shakes her head. "Did—did you—"

"I was fine." Will shrugs, but his lip curls in spite of himself. "It was ketamine. The bartender kicked out the asshole that did it by the time he saw I'd been drugged, and it wore off fast. Nothing happened."

Jimmy belches, but as per usual, acts like it was nothing. "Jesus, Will," he says. "You were drugged and you say nothing happened?"

Brian and Beverly make small sounds of agreement.

Will wishes he hadn't brought it up.

"I was *fine,"* he insists. "The bartender dropped me off at my apartment and everything was okay. Can we talk about something else now?"

His friends seem to disagree with his insouciance, but they don't press it. He can sense their lingering concern for the rest of the night, though.

Beverly walks him up to his apartment that night and tries to check in on him, but he tells her there's nothing to check in on. She leaves shortly after.

As agitated as Will is, though, he's grateful that his friends are so good to him.

It wasn't always that way. He's lucky now.

Remembering the bartender, Hannibal, he decides that, yes, he's incredibly lucky. He doesn't really want to think about how that night could have ended if he hadn't jumped in and saved him.

As he gets ready for bed, he idly wonders if he'll see him again.

Will's first week back in classes after spring break has gone pretty well. Nothing terrible has happened. He got to spend more than just a few hours with his friends, and he managed to cook something without burning up his shoddy kitchen (and it turned out tasting good, for once).

By Friday, he's feeling good about life. Maybe lucky isn't the right word for it. He's got a warm, satisfied feeling, and his shoulders don't feel so tense. He's just *good.*

When he finishes his last class of the week (a usually boring lecture period that turned out to be fairly interesting), he decides to go and relax on the main lawn.

It's a pleasant day. Chilly for late April, but the clouds are big and puffy—not quite thunderheads, but he wouldn't be surprised or disappointed if it did start to rain.

Everything's green, and it's that bright and youthful green that comes with spring. Everything is vibrant and beautiful, and with the trees covering campus, Will doesn't even mind that he's practically in the middle of the city.

It's just so damn *nice* out. Quiet, too.

He sets down his bag in the middle of the empty lawn, and lays out his jacket to sit on, shielding his body from the damp grass.

He doesn't have a book with him, and he doesn't really feel like hunching over his phone or laptop when everything is just so pleasant, so he ends up laying on his back to watch the clouds.

It feels nice. A little kiddish, but nice. Nothing wrong with that.

He lies out there on the grass for what feels like forever, and he isn't bothered by a single intrusive thought. Maybe it's because he's alone, maybe because everything is so serene.

He's not going to complain, though.

What thoughts he does have (silly, flitting thoughts, nothing he really keeps track of) are interrupted when someone settles on the ground next to him.

Will doesn't look over at first, just keeps staring up at the sky. The clouds have gone a little gray, but the sun is also lower in the sky he got here. He assumes that whoever's planted themselves next to him can only be one of three people: Beverly, Brian, or Jimmy.

But it doesn't *feel* like any of them, so he turns his head to check.

He's more than mildly surprised when he recognizes Hannibal.

He looks different, now that he's not dressed like a bartender. Most people his age would be dressed down, Will thinks, but Hannibal isn't. He's wearing a deep blue suit jacket and a black floral tie that rises and falls with his breathing. His hair, which looks softer than Will remembers, falls in tufts in all directions.

He blinks, and he says the first thing that comes to mind.

"What are you doing here?"

Hannibal turns to look at him, smiling. This close, Will is thrown off by the bow shape of his lips, the way that they make the harmless expression look either flirtatious or devious...

"Hello, Will."

Will swallows and scrambles himself to an upright position. "Uh, hello," he returns. He repeats his question, because he really can't come up with an answer on his own.

Why would Hannibal be here? Not just on campus, but lying on the grass next to Will, looking as nice as everything else the day's had to offer.

Hannibal props himself on one elbow. "I'm a student here."

"Yeah, okay." Will bites his lip, still put off. "And you're here specifically because...?"

"The sky was too beautiful to ignore." He sits up fully and places his hands on his lap. "I also thought I might say hello."

Will can't decide whether or not this is a good or a bad thing. On the one hand, Hannibal had saved his ass the week before and was a total gentleman. On the other, Will doesn't like being approached when he's alone.

"Weird," he answers, going for a middle ground.

Hannibal does that quiet laugh thing again. "God forbid we become friendly," he says.

Unable to hide a smile, Will relaxes and lay back down.

"People don't usually find me that interesting," he chuckles, folding his hands under his head. He's worked hard enough to hide the interesting bits, and he wonders what, exactly, Hannibal sees.

"They will," he replies, settling down next to him again.

Will's eyebrows shoot up, but he keeps his gaze fixed on the fast moving clouds above him. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Hannibal's lips make a small, wet sound as they part, and he takes a breath.

"You're special, Will," he murmurs. The words sound strange, and not just because they're coming from him. "People will notice eventually."

Will shoots him a side-eyed glance. In his experience, people noticing him has only led to trouble.

Like his mother. She got one look at his blue eyes and cherubic curls, wondered why she'd been silly enough to leave her baby with a cretin like Robert Graham all those years, and swept him up after a three-month court battle. He was five years old, barely verbal, and had only met the woman once. She had decided that she wanted to be a mother after all.

After that, Will was noticed for his pretty looks again and again, especially once his mother wiped away the grime and oil of his early childhood, covered him in gross finery, and paraded him around like a doll in front of her emotionless rich, socialite friends. He's done his best to build back that defensive filth, to forget the manners and behaviors his mother eventually gave up on teaching him when she sent him back to his father before he turned fifteen.

But even now, people pick him out for being *special.* Likely enamored by his pretty face, a few people have tried to pick him up and clean him off and make him usable, which makes Will wonder what Hannibal's intentions are.

He pushes that thought to the back of his mind. He's working on trusting people.

"Sure," he says, and offers up a forced smile.

"You don't believe me?" Hannibal inquires, turning on his side.

"Should I?" Will returns. "You've only met me once, and that was because of my own incapability to realize that the douchebag that was bugging me decided to slip me some Special K."

Hannibal continues staring at him. "You speak as if that's some fault of your own."

"Well, yeah," he scoffs. He doesn't know whether or not he should be feeling uncomfortable right now. This is weird, but he's not... worried.

Should he be worried?

As if reading his thoughts, Hannibal sits up and moves further away from him, creating space.

"You handled your situation well," he says. "Don't act like you did anything wrong."

Will's thoughts are full of millipedes and rotting flesh and murder, and he only casts that away by reminding himself that he was so close to giving up and just letting whatever was going to happen happen.

"I would have been fucked if you hadn't of stepped in."

"That doesn't mean you're incompetent."

Will doesn't say anything. He just wonders what the hell this guy still wants with him.

Sighing, he says, "What's your deal, Hannibal?"

"That's the second time you've asked me that."

"Oh." Right. Will feels the heat of embarrassment taking over him. "Sorry," he adds, sitting up again.

"That wasn't meant to be judgmental," Hannibal replies. "In fact, I'm flattered. It appears you're as interested in me as I am in you."

That does it. Will's cheeks go hot, and he's sure they're bright red, and he just wants to bury his face in his hands.

He doesn't, though. He keeps a brave face and even manages to look Hannibal in the eye, if for just a second.

"Guess you're as strange as I am."

Hannibal's smile flashes his teeth this time. They're bright, pointed.

"I'm glad you think so."

Will looks away quickly. He doesn't know why he's so flustered—not to say that he generally isn't, but Hannibal's got him feeling off. Not bad off, just... off.

"Still, though," he says. "You're really a student here?"

"Is that surprising to you, Will?"

Will shrugs. Hannibal looks like he's around his age, though his demeanor makes him seem much older.

"I guess."

"Well, I am," he insists. "I've almost attained my psychiatric degree." A strange look passes over his face as he says it. Pride, likely.

Will nods. Hannibal is older, then. But, not by too much, he guesses. Psychology suits him, with his elegance and cool affect, and Will's opinion of him isn't damaged for it.

"I'm close to getting my bachelor's," he replies. It's not an impressive response, but it's what he has to offer.

Still, Hannibal looks genuinely intrigued, and the tone of his voice does nothing to dispel that. "In what?" he asks, his eyes widened and trained on Will.

"Criminal justice."

He almost expects Hannibal to laugh. People usually do, given that he's infamously meek and quiet. He might look mean, strong even, but he has a slight figure and a way of being that he just doesn't want to attract attention, and that's not how people envision law enforcement.

But Hannibal doesn't laugh or mock him. He does the exact opposite, his eyes crinkling as he says, "That will be good for you."

It makes Will's stomach flip. He wants to ask how he can be so certain, they barely know each other, but doesn't get the chance. Hannibal is checking his watch, and then he lets out a long sigh.

"As pleasant as this has been," he says, "I need to get going." He gets to his feet in one swift motion and brushes himself off, though his perfectly pressed pants appear to have remained immaculate, unblemished by grass and other lawn detritus.

Will clambers up to join him. "Me too," he confesses. The sun is low in the sky now, and it's Friday night. Beverly's bound to have plans for him.

"I'll be seeing you soon, I hope," replies Hannibal. Meeting Will's eye, he smoothly adds, "Perhaps we should make plans to meet again."

"Oh. Sure." Will blinks a couple of times, confused. He realizes he should say something, maybe suggest they swap numbers or something as mundane as that, but Hannibal seems in control.

Hannibal seems to know what he wants.

"This Sunday, then?" he inquires, pulling a pen and notebook from nowhere. "We can meet at Rarefellow. Do you know the place?"

"Oh. Yeah," Will lies, suddenly feeling dumbstruck.

"Excellent." Hannibal jots something down in the notebook. "Sunday at one thirty—we'll have a late lunch. I'll see you there."

He walks away with an obscene amount of poise, with Will, in contrast, gaping like a goldfish and too idiotic to ask where 'there' is because he lied and he doesn't know where or what Rarefellow is.

Wherever it is, though, it's probably classy.

He wonders if he should clean himself up first, or stay dirty and see what Hannibal decides to do with him.

Chapter End Notes

I only included the link to the Jurassic Park theme because the friend I had beta read this had no clue what I was talking about... which I find absurd, because that was my jam as a kid, and I was always humming it/loudly singing it as a child..... and now, too, i guess.....

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Bowling puns and family stuff.

Chapter Notes

Fun Fact: The United States Botanical Gardens does not have a pavillion, but three corpse flowers bloomed there this August, which is a big deal.

I just made up some gardens that also have a fancy exclusive restaurant.

Also: a note from the author many many years into the future. I renamed the restaurant. Formerly was Garden Pavillion, now it's Rarefellow.

It's Friday night, and Will is at the bowling alley with his friends because they made a unanimous decision to avoid going to bars or clubs for a little while.

Unanimous sans Will, of course. They said it was because they thought it would be healthier to curb their drinking, especially after their "wild spring break."

Will knows that they're just trying to make him feel comfortable. He wants to insist that he's fine, he's not traumatized or anything, but he knows that they care too much to let him argue that.

Instead, he reminds them that none of their spring breaks were wild, and that none of them have ever had excessive drinking or partying habits.

"Brian, you spent the break sleeping on your grandmother's couch and playing Xbox," he says as he picks out his bowling ball. Thirteen pounds, bright blue, kind of sparkly, and (best of all) not weirdly greasy. "And Jimmy, you were helping your uncle build your little cousin a treehouse!" He turns on Beverly with a wicked grin.

"And we all know that you were at that Christian mountain retreat with your mom. The only buzz you were getting was from the communion wine."

Beverly shoots him a scowl and lifts up her own ball (eleven pounds, marbled green and white).

"Let me be a supportive child. My mother has found her god and is at peace with the world. Quit nagging me about it."

And that's the end of the discussion. They have a good time, really.

Will's not upset they're not out drinking; it's not something commonplace between the four of them, anyway. Bars are boring, clubs are too loud. It's much nicer to sip root beer with a neon yellow straw and watch Jimmy and Brian both get continual gutter balls. It makes him feel better about the fact that the best he can manage is the occasional spare.

Though, Beverly is clearly the champion. She gets a strike every other go, it seems, and is racking up the points.

"How the hell do you do it?" Jimmy groans, after somehow landing his ball (orange, fifteen pounds, which is five too heavy for him, but they don't say anything because he's clearly trying to compensate) in the next lane over.

He gets another go, but the teenager in that lane whose turn registered as a gutter ball is not so happy. His friends snicker as he glowers at Jimmy, who ignores it and plops into his own seat.

"As a kid, I *ruled* the local bowling joint," Beverly tells him, getting up to bowl yet another strike.

The bowling pins on the screen dance in congratulations, and like that, the game's over. She sits back down and crosses her legs, smirking at them in victory.

"One more game?" Will asks, already reaching in his pocket for a few dollar bills.

But Brian and Jimmy groan simultaneously, which gives him pause.

"Please, no," Jimmy pleads.

Brian nods earnestly. "Spare us from this hell."

"Spare you?" Beverly laughs. "I'll *strike* you dead, losers."

Even Will groans. "I think that's enough of that," he says, and gets to his feet.

They return their clownish orange-and-green bowling shoes to the stoned kid at the counter. He gives them their shoes back and tells them to come again later, and even though neither party is genuine, the group promises they will.

Outside, it's sprinkling, but just barely. Friday's clouds stuck around, but they aren't exactly delivering.

As they walk over to the nearest bus stop, Beverly stretches her arms high and glances at the three of them, still basking in her glorious victory.

"So, what are you nerds planning for tomorrow?"

"Sleep," Brian and Jimmy both say. They high five each other afterwards, too.

"Typical," Beverly snorts, and she elbows Will. "What about you, buddy boy?"

Will shrugs. "Oh, you know. The usual. Probably'll rob a few drug stores, maybe seduce a genie and wish for him to find homes for all the dogs in the shelter."

Brian snickers at him. "Homes in your apartment?" he asks.

"Man," Jimmy sighs. "Don't bring that up. I still miss Chuckles."

"Hey," Beverly snaps. "We all do. He was a good pup." She wipes away at a fake (but not necessarily mocking) tear. "Now I'm sad."

Wistful, Will lets out a long breath. "Me too," he says. "Honestly, fuck my landlord. Chuckles wasn't doing anything wrong!"

Brian, always the voice of reason, rolls his eyes at him. "He barked at everything that moved, and you couldn't wash the shit-smell from him. Plus he had that thing--"

"Hey!" cries Beverly, louder now. "Don't judge Chuckles. He was developmentally challenged."

They all share a moment of silence in memory of Chuckles. Will thinks he got adopted, but one of the security guards kicked him out of the shelter last time he asked, and he hasn't bothered trying to go back and check.

When they get to the bus stop, they stand under the lamp post together.

"Gee, wish I had a cigarette or something," Beverly mutters. "Then I could look like an edgy film noir love interest."

Will snorts, and is about to give her some snark about glorifying tobacco, but forgets when he notices the poster on the side of the bus stop shelter. It's a local tourism advertisement for the botanical gardens, and he isn't sure why it's caught his eye until he *remembers*.

"Shit," he whispers.

They all jump at his sudden expletive—not because he's a stranger to swearing, but more because of his tone.

"What?" Jimmy demands, eyes wide. "Did you forget your wallet?"

Brian looks up from tying his shoes and gasps. "Did *I* forget my wallet?" he asks, and pats at his pockets. "Oh, never mind. I'm good. What's the deal, Will?"

Beverly's arms are crossed, and she nods earnestly.

Will almost sighs and tells them that it's nothing, but he knows that's not going to work, and it's getting kind of old.

"I have a lunch date with a guy named Hannibal."

His friends seem to process that for a moment, and they all stare at each other as the bus pulls up. Will is the first to board, pulling out his card and scanning it as he goes for the back of the empty bus.

Beverly follows, slightly frantic as she grabs his coat sleeve.

"Hannibal?" she asks, yanking him into a seat. "Who the fuck is that?"

Brian is quick to follow, already having swiped his card while Jimmy fumbles with coins because he forgot to reload his.

Will shrugs as they both approach. Giving his best genuine *I-have-no-fucking-clue* face, he just kind of holds his hands in the air.

"He was the bartender from spring break," he says, feeling incredibly awkward.

Brian plops down in the seat behind Will. "Bartender? You didn't tell us about any hot bartenders."

"Who's a hot bartender?" Jimmy demands, shoving his wallet back in his pocket and sitting next to Brian.

"I never said he was hot," Will says, looking over his shoulder to glare at him.

Beverly punches him on the shoulder. "But there is a bartender!"

"Obviously," Jimmy replies. "No one's denying that there is a bartender out there..."

"...somewhere, doing something," Brian confirms, frowning. "But there is one in this situation, correct? And he's attractive?"

Will groans and buries his face in his hands. "Oh my god. Yes. There is a bartender. And I guess he's kind of good looking."

"Okay, now we're getting somewhere!" Brian exclaims, clapping his hands together.

Beverly nods vigorously and elbows Will again. "Why haven't we heard of this bartender yet?"

"Chill out, all of you," Will snaps, raising his voice, "or you're going to have a Graham-clam on your hands."

They all fall silent for a moment, giving him time to explain.

"I did mention him briefly," he tells them, taking his face from his hands and trying to relax. "He was the one who saved my ass when I had... that issue."

The three of them all let out an "Ohhhhhh."

And then they start talking at once again.

"You're going out to lunch with him?"

"Did he ask you out earlier and you didn't tell us until now?"

"Who is this mysterious savior, anyway?"

And Will just squeezes his eyes shut because he can't tell who's talking anyway over the sound of the bus speakers rattling off stop names and the general bouncing of the road.

Then, they quiet down.

"Shit," Beverly sighs. "Sorry. Feeling clammy?"

Will takes a deep breath. "Not quite," he says, exhaling slowly. "I'm just stressed because of this whole thing. It doesn't really have anything to do with any of you." He opens his eyes and turns around to look at Brian and Jimmy. "And, uh, we ran into each other yesterday. He asked me to meet him for lunch at a place called Rarefellow--and I don't even know where that is, let alone if it's going to be a date or not."

"Hm," Brian grunts.

"Kind of shitty," Beverly mutters.

"But also intriguing," Jimmy points out. "We'll help you out if we can, though. If you want."

Will smiles. "Thanks, guys."

The bus pulls up to the stop for the school. Jimmy and Brian say quick goodbyes and hurry off the bus, leaving Will and Beverly on a nearly-empty bus to brood together.

She doesn't ask him anymore questions, but right before his stop arrives, she informs him she'll be doing some research and will check out the restaurant's menu. "Because I'm going to want to live vicariously through you and salivate over their online menu."

He thanks her and gets off the bus, walks the short distance to his building, and takes the elevator up to his floor.

Once he's inside of his apartment, he slumps against the closed door and takes a deep, shuddering breath.

He feels pretty done with socializing for the weekend, but he knows he doesn't want to stand Hannibal up.

Beverly calls him midmorning on Saturday to tell him that the Rarefellow is actually a pavilion bar and restaurant in the middle of the U.S. Botanical Gardens.

"I can help you find an outfit," she offers. "I know it's not really your thing, flannel boy, but my old roommate just left behind some really stylish clothes, and—"

Will cuts her off with a sigh, phone clutched between his ear and his shoulder as he absently stirs dry oats into a boiling pot. Beverly doesn't know about his brief stint with high society—none of his friends do.

He doesn't plan on mentioning it.

"I can manage," he promises her. "I'm not a total barbarian."

Beverly snorts, the sound crackly through the line. "You eat soup straight from the can," she reminds him.

"It's efficient," he offers.

It makes him feel like he has some sort of say in who he is. Not just cold soup, but little acts of rebellion like that, things that he shares with his father.

"Well, think better than efficient when you meet this guy. You said he wears three piece suits?"

"He does," Will confirms, with a bit of a grimace.

He doesn't like people that flaunt their wealth like that. There are better things to be bought than silk ties and underwear.

"You better up your game, then, Graham," Beverly orders, and hangs up.

Will decides that he might.

Even after their failed relationship, Will's mother still left him with a fortune of his own. Old money, not really her money, but she set up an account for him to access once he turned eighteen. It's enough to sustain him well for a lifetime, and the amount probably doesn't matter much to her, though it matters even less to him.

So far, Will has really only used it to pay for his college tuition. George Washington isn't cheap, after all, and he isn't a fool.

Summer work pays for his apartment and most everything else. He's reluctant to dip into his mother's funds for just anything; it makes him feel like he owes her something. Sometimes, he uses it *because* he feels like he owes her something.

Last time he did that, it was the summer after his freshman year at GW. He went to a tailor, had some nice suits made for himself, and caught a plane to visit his mother at her summer home in Georgia—the republic, not the state.

Dressed nicely and soothed after some years away from her, Will was able to remain presentable for a few days. She cooed over how handsome he'd become, taken him to dinner

parties to boast about how wonderful her son had turned out to be, and it was beginning to seem like she'd never let him go.

It felt stifling, acting prim and proper. Boring, too, with no one to really talk to.

Not long after, he met a young man named Andro, the son of a professor his mother was friends with. They had an enthusiastic discussion about American serial killers, right at the dinner table.

It was rowdy, it was thrilling, it was *uncivil.*

Will's mother had let it slide; she knew what Will was studying, and had soothed the other people at the table by reminding them that her *darling William* would catch the monsters he so fervently described. He didn't argue with her.

It was when she caught him and Andro exchanging heated kisses on the front lawn that she lost her temper, and when the other man was gone, she wailed about Will's endless shortcomings and lamented over the fact that of course she couldn't have a *normal* son.

He returned to the States shortly after that, and he hasn't seen her since, but he *does* still have the suits.

They all still fit him perfectly, too, and he decides his lunch with Hannibal is a good reason to revive them.

He takes out the green one and lays it out on his bed. It's such a dark shade of emerald that it almost looks black, even in the bright florescent lights of his apartment.

This is a suit he never had the chance to wear, and he rubs his fingers against the lapel of the jacket. Smooth, soft, *rich.*

He sits down on the bed and stares at it for all of twenty minutes before he finally decides to get up and put it on. He chooses a gray shirt and forgoes a tie for the sake of feeling *slightly* casual, and by the time it's all put together, he feels caged.

Fiddling with the cufflinks, he crosses into his tiny bathroom. He leaves the door open and the lights off, and stares at the sink before he can stand to look in the mirror.

Will Graham isn't in the mirror. Instead, he sees Will Beaulieu, the man his mother had dreamed him to be, the man he might have been if he hadn't gone back to his father. He sees the man she sought to create when she first saw his picture, when she flew from her family estate in Georgia (the state this time, not the republic) to take him into her arms and sweep him away from his father.

He swallows, and the pendulum swings when he looks into his own eyes.

The week before his fifteenth birthday.

Will (Beaulieu now, for he has yet to go home and become a Graham again) isn't by the river like he remembers. Instead, he's sat in front of the piano in the sun room, occasionally glancing out the window at his mother, Angelique.

He plays the piano with skill no Graham is capable of, but it makes sense, because he's a Beaulieu here.

Beaulieu's know how to look people in the eye. They know how to be tactful, how to flatter, how to operate in a crowd of socialites.

Beaulieu's don't spend all day alone, fishing and trying to keep dark thoughts at bay. They don't lose control of themselves, they don't see things they shouldn't, and they aren't violent. They aren't sent back to their fathers when those things become apparent, a week before their fifteenth birthdays.

Will Beaulieu sings like an angel, and he performs in front of a crowd of friends for his fifteenth birthday. Angelique is the first to applaud, and she kisses his cheeks and tells him what a perfect son he is.

He dances with the girls and steals a discreet kiss from a boy late in the evening, but he doesn't let his mother see.

Will Beaulieu does return to Louisiana, but not until after his fifteenth birthday, and not for longer than a few days. He reads with David Graham in the evenings, tries to have civilized discussions with him, avoids going fishing.

This David Graham is an alcoholic, because his son has been completely stolen by his baby mama, and he hasn't known him for ten years.

Will Beaulieu gives him a brief goodbye and never comes back.

Will blinks again and he's back in the bathroom of his apartment in D.C.. The suit jacket is crumpled on the floor, and he's leaned against the counter, his face pressed close to the mirror. His breath fogs the reflection of the lower half of his face, and he realizes that he's panting.

He isn't Will Beaulieu, he's Will Graham again, and he's glad he was by the river that day, and all the days before that.

He's glad his father is still sober, that he still knows him.

He shucks of the rest of his suit and leaves it on the floor, already feeling sweat beading on his back. It's approaching eleven, and he knows he isn't going to make it to Rarefellow to see Hannibal.

He can't. He can't clean himself up again. He can't push himself into being that person again.

He's still weird little Will Graham, who doesn't like table manners or eye contact and feels like a fish out of water in a crowd.

Stripped back down to his underwear, he collapses on his bed for a while, eyes closed and doing his best to think of nothing.

After one thirty, he calls his father, because he needs to ground the Graham in him.

The phone only has to ring three times before he picks up, and Will doesn't say anything for a few seconds, absorbed by the sounds of the water and wind coming through the receiver.

"This what you kids call an ass dial?" asks his father, almost shouting through the line.

"No, Dad," Will answers, and he closes his eyes and exhales through his nose. If he concentrates, he can smell the Louisiana air: wet and sharp. "You on the boat?"

"Damn right," he says. He pulls away from the phone for a moment to whoop into the wind. A free man, loose on the bayou.

Will laughs. "I could go for some open water right now."

He can hear the disbelief ringing through the line, even over the static of the engine and the wind.

"The hell's stopping you, Willy? You got the Potomac right there, and you know your mama —"

"Don't mention Angelique," Will grunts. "Just... describe it to me. The water."

"Shit," snorts David. "You trying to get me writing again, son? It's green. Algae's parting like curtains behind the boat—damn. You remember those curtains we had back when I was working on Lake Michigan? That kind of green; god, they were nasty."

"Musty as hell," he agrees, a smile breaking out on his face.

He liked Michigan. It was green and humid, like home, but it wasn't so hot. He's never liked the heat; bundling up has always been more his style.

"You still using that baking soda trick?" David asks. "Gets the smell outta anything, even those goddamned curtains."

"Used it on Brian and Jimmy's couch," Will tells him.

"The whole damned thing?"

"Yeah. Not a big one, though; barely fits two of us."

David chuckles, like he'd expected nothing less, and Will hears the engine grumble to a stop as the wind lessens. His father's voice comes through much clearer, now.

"How're those two?" he asks. "They get over themselves and admitted to shacking up yet?"

"Close to it," Will replies, and his smile widens.

At least *one* of his parents isn't homophobic.

"And you, Willy? You shacked up yet? I haven't heard from you since July."

Will holds his breath, and he thinks about the bar and Jacob and Hannibal and the suit and *everything*.

"No, Dad," he sighs. "Not even close."

And his father, ever the cheerleader, snorts. "Get on it, then," he grumbles. "I won't have you end up alone and old like me, Willy. And we both know damn well you won't be making no sons to keep you company. I'm the lucky one out of us."

"Yes, sir," Will agrees. It would be a hassle for him to ever have a child, and he can't see ever going through with all that.

"You tell me when you snare in some handsome bastard, got it, son?" There's the sound of feet striking a creaky dock, and Will knows his father is back at the boatyard.

"Will do," he promises. "You got engines to fix?"

"Never don't," David replies. "You got books to read?"

"More than just books, but yeah."

"Go on, then. And you call me soon as something happens, good or bad, understand? I worry like a mother duck."

"Someone's gotta."

"Don't I know it, boy. Keep your head straight, now, and don't let those dreams of yours bleed in too deep."

And David Graham hangs up, having all but told Will "I love you, son."

It's what Will needed to hear.

Chapter 4

Will feels an ache following him around when he returns to classes for the week.

Something lingering, watching.

He's sure it's just his staple paranoia. It hasn't been so bad lately, but he *did* kind of have a bit of a break on Sunday. It doesn't do much to calm his nerves, but it's always good to be able to identify the source.

Something else follows him, though, and it's more tangible. It's his own ache, his own guilt.

He feels bad that he stood Hannibal up. He isn't sure if it's because he feels like he missed an opportunity, or because he's worried that he hurt Hannibal's feelings.

He tells himself that he would have had a bad time anyway, that Hannibal will find another, more interesting person to replace him.

It doesn't make him feel much better, though, and after a few days of brooding over it, he comes to a decision.

He texts the group chat to let his friends know that he won't be attending their Thursday night ramen dinner.

Jimmy is the only one that texts him back.

dammit, graham, i already spent one whole fuckign dollar on your serving, now i'm gonna have to eat it myself

Will smiles and boards the bus to the other side of town.

Hannibal is behind the bar, just like he'd hoped.

He's dressed down for work. His white shirt is rolled up to his elbows, and his hair is slicked back. He spots Will as soon as he enters, his gaze practically magnetized, eyes dark and warm in the blue light of the bar.

Will swallows the lump in his throat and tries not to figure out what Hannibal is thinking. He can't read those eyes.

Before he can approach him, Hannibal's attention is pulled away by a patron. Will listens to them talk as he settles himself onto a barstool.

"The usual, Franklyn?" Hannibal asks, his tone dry and uninterested.

"Whatever you think's best," the customer, Franklyn, insists. He's watching Hannibal closely. Almost hungrily.

"The usual, then," Hannibal sighs, and turns around to reach for a wine glass. He pours a deep red and sets it on the counter.

As he does so, he makes eye contact with Will. In a hurried response, Will nods and then drops his gaze.

He feels disappointed when Hannibal moves to the other side of the bar and begins polishing glasses. It looks like busy work, and Will has a feeling that Hannibal is avoiding him.

Will can't say he blames him, but he doesn't want to leave before they even *talk.*

He feels a nudge at his elbow, and turns to look.

"Hello," says Franklyn. "Are you a friend of Hannibal's?"

Will blinks at him, but doesn't say anything. He just looks at the chubby man next to him, focuses on the drab brown suit and the beginnings of facial hair on his chin.

His eyes don't show any hostility, but rather a sharp and keen interest.

It makes Will uneasy, and he smiles weakly. "Of sorts."

"Then you go to school with him?" Franklyn presses, taking a sip of the wine. "Hannibal doesn't talk much about school. Or himself. He tries to keep his personal life out of work, or so he always tells me." He laughs, then, and nudges Will again. "I saw the way he looked at you. He *knows* you."

Swallowing, Will tries to ignore the bundle of nerves building in his chest. This Franklyn is clearly obsessed.

"You should tell me about him," Franklyn adds, grinning. "I'm trying to get to know him."

Will struggles to find an answer, but finds himself relieved by Hannibal's presence. He appears out of the blue, snuck in on silent feet.

"I'm afraid that's not how the process works," Hannibal tells Franklyn, a warning in his tone. "I've warned you once, Mister Froideveaux. If you continue with this behavior, I *will* ban you from this establishment."

Franklyn pouts at him, like he doesn't believe it. "Barkeeps are supposed to be sociable."

"I am under no contractual obligation to indulge you," Hannibal snaps.

"That's not very kind," Franklyn says, wincing.

Hannibal all but rolls his eyes and turns to Will. "My shift will be over in a minute. Join me outside?"

Shocked by the fact he's been addressed, Will can only nod. He slides off of his seat and hurries to the front door. As he's leaving, he can hear Franklyn's plaintive moan.

"Your shift doesn't end until eleven on Thursdays! I was going to get to *talk* to you."

Hannibal's response is as cool as the night air that Will steps out into.

"I think you should *talk* to a therapist."

The door closes behind him, leaving the sounds of the bar muted. Will leans against the wall of the building and wonders if there's going to be a scene.

But it's only a moment later that the door opens and Hannibal is next to him, a dark suit jacket returned to his ensemble and irritation spelling itself out across his features.

Will can't help but notice that it looks very controlled. It's a display of body language, and Will can't read any of it in Hannibal's eyes. He's like a blank slate.

"Franklyn won't be distracted long," Hannibal tells him, placing a hand on his upper arm. "Join me for a ride?"

"Um." Will blinks at him. "Sure."

"Come along, then."

Hannibal leads him to his Bentley, which is parked in the same spot that it was the last time Will was here. Hannibal doesn't bother to get his door for him, and they're at the next block by the time they can see Franklyn stepping out of the bar from the rearview mirror.

"You abandoned post," Will remarks, and looks at the time displayed on the car's dash. "It's eight seventeen. I doubt your shift really just ended."

Hannibal laughs and turns onto a main street. "Bedelia was quick to take over," he says. "Were it not for me, she would be working now, anyway."

"Who's Bedelia?"

"She owns the bar."

Silence settles between them when they stall at a red light. A few pedestrians wait on the sidewalk to cross, and a loud bass line pumps out of the car next to them.

"Seems like you've had to deal with that Franklyn plenty of times before," Will remarks. "Why'd you cut him off this time?"

The light turns green and Hannibal eases the car back into motion. "I didn't want to trigger anything for you."

"Excuse me?" Will turns to look at him and chews on his lower lip.

"You dealt with a similar character yourself last you were at the *Uffizi.* I did not want you to have to endure it again."

Will frowns for a second, partly because he can't believe that he'd forgotten that Hannibal worked in a bar named the fucking *Uffizi,* and partly because Hannibal sounds awfully sorry about something that isn't his fault.

"I would have been fine," he says. "I'm just glad *you* didn't continue dealing with him."

Hannibal glances over at him, a smile barely showing on his lips. "I would have been fine."

Will thinks of the way Hannibal spoke to Franklyn, of how he spoke to Jacob, and he agrees. The man clearly does not put up with bullshit when it comes to people he doesn't like.

And yet, he's driving Will (somewhere) even after he stood him up.

"Where are you taking me?" he asks.

Hannibal flips on the turn signal. "I thought we might have dinner," he says. "Clearly, you have the time for me now."

As the car slows to a stop in front of a parking meter, Will feels his cheeks go hot. He looks down at his lap.

"Sorry for not showing," he says.

"I'm sure your absence was justified."

Hannibal takes the keys from the ignition and gets out of the car, and Will doesn't wait for Hannibal to open the door for him. He hurries out, almost tripping onto the sidewalk, but Hannibal catches him by the shoulders before he can fall.

"Careful," Hannibal warns, gripping him firmly. "I should hope that we both survive the evening in one piece."

Normally, Will might squirm under the fixed eye contact, but with Hannibal, he finds no need. The warm and heavy hands on him help to relax him, too."I think you've proven that I'm in good hands with you," he says.

Hannibal lets go of his shoulders and offers a smile. "Shall we head inside?"

Will nods and looks past him at the building they've parked in front of. A small, orange light illuminates a wooden sign that dubs the place *The Red Fern.* The windows are tinted, but Will can see some glow escaping.

He lets Hannibal take his arm and lead him inside. He barely has a moment to worry over whether or not he's underdressed before the door has closed behind them.

The limited collection of patrons within are all dressed relatively casually. The entire place lacks the general pomp and circumstance Will might have expected.

It's quiet, subtle.

"The Red Fern prefers not to have attention drawn to itself," Hannibal tells him, whispering low into his ear. "Many patrons dress quite casually. Neither of us will stand out here."

Will finds himself more soothed by Hannibal's voice than the words themselves, and he stews in that while a waiter leads them to a small table towards the back of the room.

There can't be more than a dozen tables in the entire place, and only two of them are filled. Will notes with some surprise that a man is playing a viola in the corner, and the music hums throughout the room.

"I like it here," Will says, taking the napkin from his place and setting it on his lap. It's nice, but not gaudy or extravagant. Nothing like what his mother would have enjoyed, but he can imagine his father liking it (in another world where David Graham liked anything other than canned stews on his back porch, of course).

"Good," Hannibal replies. "I realized too late that you prefer privacy. Is that why you didn't make it to Rarefellow? I realize that the location was a bit... ostentatious."

He thinks of the photos Beverly sent him from the website. Women in showy dresses, stiff-collared attendants in every corner, white tablecloths. It was too much like his mother, oozing with old-money Southern 'charm.'

"Very observant," Will says, feeling surprisingly flattered. "That was part of the reason, yeah."

Hannibal's regard does not waver, but something in his expression seems to twist. "I hope I needn't worry about the rest of the reason."

He looks *shy,* and Will worries that it's made him blush again.

"Nothing to do with you," he promises.

He thinks of his worry that Hannibal might try to polish him, to scrape him clean of his defensive grime. He doesn't see any reason to believe that now, with Hannibal's smile almost reaching a normal human width.

Still, though, Hannibal's expressions are subtle, and Will thinks he likes that. It's not so overwhelming.

"I'm glad to hear it, Will."

The waiter returns with two glasses of wine that Will doesn't remember either of them ordering. Hannibal thanks the man in what sounds like Italian, and raises his glass once he's gone.

"To a salvaged meeting," he proposes.

Will clinks his glass and realizes that he could very easily forget that anything had gone wrong in the first place.

They eat pears and blue cheese with a thick balsamic glaze, drink what is apparently a *very* expensive wine (judging by what little Will's palate remembers), and talk with more ease than Will would have expected.

Hannibal is surprisingly soft spoken when it's just the two of them. He looks at Will with a curiosity that makes him feel like he's smoldering, emotes so rarely that Will feels safe to look at him. The dim light of the restaurant only adds to the soothing, intimate atmosphere.

The main course arrives sooner than he thought it would, and Will's mouth waters at the smell of it.

"Osso buco," the waiter tells them, and slides away from the table once he's set down their plates.

"Veal shanks," Hannibal elaborates. "This is one of my favorite dishes."

Will watches the way that he delicately cuts the meat, regards his poise and his reserve. It's everything he usually hates and yet it's like nothing he's ever seen before.

He saws at the food on his own with much less elegance (his mother never really could scrub all the roughness off of him) and takes a bite. It's delicious.

Hannibal watches him eat.

"I could make it taste better," he says, his whisper sounding near conspiratorial.

"Could you?" Will asks. "It seems pretty great to me."

"I'm an excellent chef," Hannibal promises. "Though, this is one of the few establishments of which I approve."

Will nods and takes another bite; he can tell. The waiter seemed familiar with him, and Hannibal hadn't ordered a single thing that had come to their table.

"Do you eat out often?" Will wonders.

He tries to imagine Hannibal at this table alone, or with someone else, or even a group of people. Only the first seems entirely plausible, though perhaps it's his own psyche impressing that upon him.

Hannibal takes a sip of the wine, which *does* pair well with the veal.

"No," he says. "I prefer to prepare my own food, but there are a spare few occasions when I allow someone else to take control."

A smile makes its way onto Will's lips, a soft one that he isn't so familiar with wearing. "Maybe you should cook for me sometime."

Hannibal's eyes seem to light up at that, glowing in the dim. "I would love that, Will."

Will swallows another bite of veal and wonders if this only *feels* a lot like a date.

Hannibal pays for dinner and doesn't allow Will to see the bill. He doesn't object, much to his own surprise, and allows himself to be led back to Hannibal's car.

The weight of Hannibal's hand on the crook of his elbow is a delicate thing, but compelling all the same.

There's still time left on the parking meter, and Hannibal doesn't put the keys in the ignition when they get in. Instead, he looks over at Will, his eyes looking red in the glow of the streetlight.

"I don't think I want this evening to end," he admits.

Will purses his lips. He doesn't want it to, either.

"Why do you work as a bartender?" he asks. They haven't really discussed anything outside of classes and philosophy, and he thinks he wants to know *more* about Hannibal.

Hannibal takes the initiative to extend their conversation readily.

"I take it as an excuse to further study the human mind."

Will raises his eyebrows at that. "Don't get enough of that in school?"

"Not entirely," Hannibal answers. "I hardly scratch the surface with my official work. I've found that people are much more willing to bare themselves under the influence of alcohol, and even more so to those who provide it."

"Weird," Will remarks, amused all the same. "A little creepy. But that Franklyn fellow seemed on board with it."

A grimace passes over Hannibal's face, like sound waves disturbing still water.

"Unfortunately, Franklyn is *too* enthusiastic," he admits. "Not only is his mind terribly dull, but he has a chronic habit of stalking bartenders across the city. I am only at the end of a long line of tortured souls. It shouldn't be long until he's arrested for the continued harassment."

"Lovely," Will mutters.

Hannibal simpers at him, and when he blinks, it looks like he's fluttering his lashes. Will's breath escapes him.

"Your own studies imply you hold a fascination for the mind," Hannibal remarks. "Are you enjoying criminal psychology?"

It occurs to Will that he shouldn't let his guard down so low, that he shouldn't say what exactly is crossing his mind, but he simultaneously feels no reason *not* to.

"It's too easy," he confesses, and lets that hang in the air for a moment.

He waits for Hannibal to grow tense, to start the engine and suggest they leave, but the quiet between them is rich with dual anticipation.

"Is it?" Hannibal asks. His voice has dropped in volume and in pitch, and his hands are folded neatly over his lap.

Will isn't sure what Hannibal is feeling, and it's the uncertainty that makes him willing to take the risk and continue.

"I don't have much issue understanding anyone," he admits. "Most people's eyes say everything I need to know. The things that they leave behind say a lot, too. The way they arrange their books on a coffee table, or how they drape their coats over the back of a sofa. It's like looking at their ghosts."

"You can crawl into a criminal's head, then," Hannibal says. He sounds almost passive, but Will doesn't miss the way he's started breathing from his mouth. He isn't sure to read that as fear or arousal.

Neither make much sense to him. He leans back into his seat and takes a slow breath. "More that they crawl into mine," he whispers. A shudder passes over him, rattling down his spine like his dad's truck on a rocky dirt road. His mouth starts speaking before he has half a mind to direct it, and the indecipherable intensity rolling off of Hannibal tells him it's alright.

"When I was fifteen—still fourteen, I suppose—I found a body in the river by my mother's house. I used to fish there, but I didn't get to that day. On account of the body, I guess, though I faintly remember casting my line into the water before I went to investigate. It was a girl, only a handful of years younger than myself, and when I really saw her and what had happened to her and I felt as if I had been *consumed.*

"I was filled with this —this ache, and I felt as if I'd done it myself. There was so much regret, and I felt crushed with it. I couldn't tell what was mine and what was the killer's, and I ran to my mother's house and told her I had killed a girl."

He pauses, takes a deep breath, and he sees that Hannibal is listening, enraptured. There is no fear or disgust there, and Will presses on.

"It ruined the festivities, to say the least. My mother was preparing for my fifteenth birthday, and she broke down screaming while someone called the police. When I showed them the body, they realized that I hadn't been the one to kill her, and they took me to a psychiatric ward before my mother sent me home to recover back with my father in Lousiana.

"Turns out I had viral encephalitis," Will laughs, and it's shaky because he realizes he's never actually *told* anyone about this willingly. "I've never lapsed into anyone's head like I did when I found the girl's body, but some sick part of me realized I had a gift, so I decided to go into justice."

He glances over again at his audience, and nearly keens when he sees that Hannibal is still there, still hooked on him.

"Will," he sighs, and he sounds like a devout man praying to a towering, burning god, "I knew you were terribly special the moment I met you."

Special, Will thinks, and the word makes something coil inside him. *Not strange or cute or peculiar.*

Normally, it wouldn't be much better, but he's already beginning to sense that Hannibal isn't *normal.*

"Tell me," Hannibal adds, *pleads,* turning to look at him head-on, "did you see what your assailant was thinking the night he drugged you?"

See.

"He was full of want," Will murmurs, and closes his eyes to be touched with the memory of millepedes on rotting earth. "I didn't dare to look him in the eye and see beyond that. I usually don't."

Hannibal hums, and reaches across the console to touch Will's hand, still resting on his lap.

"You've looked into my eyes," he says. "Have you seen what *I* want?"

A laugh bubbles up inside of Will, and suddenly he's uneasy, but he flips his hand to lock their fingers together anyway. "You're not so easy to see, Hannibal."

"I should hope not." Hannibal lowers his voice to a sultry whisper.. "I would hate to think you find me ordinary."

"You don't have to worry about that," Will promises, still swimming with the notion that he'd all but confessed his deepest, darkest secret, and Hannibal was more entranced than discomfited.

Hannibal slides his thumb over the back of Will's hand, rubbing over skin he wouldn't ordinarily consider sensitive. The touch ripples across his skin—sound waves over still water.

"No," he agrees. "I suppose not."

He leans in closer to Will, so much that their breathing mingles in the space between them, and Will is almost sure that he's going to lean in as well and kiss him.

Before he can gather the nerve to do so, however, Hannibal smiles and pulls away, putting the key into the ignition.

The engine mutters its way back to life, and Will lets out a breath he hadn't realized he was holding.

"Drop me off on campus?" Will asks.

He thinks of Jimmy and Brian and Beverly, and how he might need them to ground him after feeling so airy from all this. He thinks of how he doesn't want the airiness to go away, and how he might do something brash if Hannibal gives him the opportunity.

Hannibal smiles and drives him back to Foggy Bottom.

When Will gets out of the car, Hannibal does, too. He takes Will's hands and brushes his lips against the fingertips.

Will doesn't swoon, but he feels unsteady as he walks away, listening to the sound of Hannibal's car fade into the noise of the city.

He doesn't go to Jimmy and Brian's room.

He goes to the library and buries himself in the heads of monsters, if only to convince himself that he isn't one, that Hannibal doesn't think he is and he *deserves* that.

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The library is relatively empty when Will arrives. There are a few clusters of quiet study groups, and several people working alone with headphones on, and overall, it's peaceful.

Will settles himself at one of the library desktops. He left his laptop and all his other school supplies at his apartment, so this is what he's left with.

He logs onto his email and sees that his forensic psychology professor has contacted him. A glower settles on his face immediately; Doctor Chilton is far from his favorite human being.

The subject line ("Project Performance") is vaguely menacing, but it's an email he's been expecting for weeks. It's dated Tuesday, and he's disappointed in himself for not checking his email sooner.

He poured everything he had into that final project before spring break, and given who Chilton is as a person, Will isn't going to get a good grade on it.

He opens it with a click, expecting a brief, generic message telling him that he needs to stick to the assigned task or something like that.

What he receives is something else entirely. Just one look at the block of text makes him want to buckle himself in for a rough ride.

Mister Graham.

I apologize for neglecting to send your grades to you as promptly as I had for your classmates. Your submission made the procedure difficult, to say the least.

As I'm sure you are aware, my time at the BSHCI has earned me connections with a number of important state and federal agencies. One of those connections is with the FBI. Specifically, the head of the Behavioral Sciences Unit, Jack Crawford.

Crawford has directed that should I encounter any interesting minds in my teaching, I send them his way. Your report on the Grafton Totem Pole has given me reason to do so.

I sent in your paper to Crawford as soon as I read it. I have always found your perspective interesting, Mister Graham, but this was beyond any and all expectations.

You should be pleased to know that your analysis allowed Crawford's team to finally catch the perpetrator, after three years of the case remaining unsolved. A seventy-three year old man named Larry Wells, can you believe it?

Well, I'm sure you can. Your profile, after all, was quite thorough.

Attached is your grade report for the semester. While your analysis of the case was ultimately correct, I must remind you that the point of the project was not to solve it (hence why I insist that each student choose an unsolved *case), but to explain the reasoning behind your assumptions.*

If you expect to receive anything above a C grade, I would advise that you explain your thought processes.

That said, Special Agent Jack Crawford would like to speak with you. I've invited him onto campus this Friday, and I did promise that you would be there to meet him. Check your Google Calendar for an invite, and I'll see you then.

I hope you don't disappoint.

Regards,

Frederick S. Chilton, PhD
Associate Professor and Chair
Department of Psychology
Columbian College of Arts and Sciences

Will blinks, frozen in shock.

He reads the email again, once, twice, and he isn't sure how he should feel.

First, he's pissed that he managed to solve a *fucking federal investigation* and Chilton still only gave him a C grade for it.

Then, he's over the moon because he solved a *fucking federal investigation.*

He stares at Chilton's signature and scowls, because of *course* the son of the bitch wants him to explain his thought processes. He wants to get into Will's head.

Will thinks of Hannibal, who also likes to get into people's heads, and everything in his gut seems to neutralize all at once and he thinks rationally.

He's going to meet an FBI agent. Tomorrow. And not because he's a suspect.

This is what he's always wanted, in a way. He's caught a murderer, done the world a little bit of good.

He wonders if he'll be congratulated, and he both expects and hopes that he won't be.

Will stares at the screen of the library computer for a long time, thinking of everything and nothing at all, wondering if he should call his dad or not, wondering what this means for him.

He's interrupted when someone taps on his shoulder. He looks to find the barely familiar face of a young woman.

"Hey," she says, one eyebrow raised at him in blatant curiosity. "You're the guy from the bar last week."

He frowns at her. "I'm afraid I don't recall meeting you."

"I bet," she says, and chuckles. "When I asked later, Hannibal told me you were pretty fucked over and he had to drive you home."

"Did he really phrase it like that?" Will asks, returning an arched brow. This girl knows Hannibal?

"No," she answers, and slides into the chair next to his. "Hanni's a proper little shit."

Will smiles at the nickname, and then it all clicks into place. He remembers her and another woman teasing Hannibal just before they left.

"Margot, right?" he asks.

She grins at him. "Wow. Did Hannibal really mention me?"

"No. I just now managed to place the memory."

Usually, he's good at remembering names and faces—part of having an eidetic memory. The ketamine likely inhibited that ability.

"Ah." She shrugs and leans onto the table with both elbows, trying to catch his eye and failing.

Will looks back at the screen and the email he still hasn't closed.

"Have you seen Hannibal since then?" she asks, prodding his calf with her foot. "He's mentioned you three times, and in Hannibal speak, that's equivalent to infatuation."

Will blinks and wonders what Hannibal said about him, when he said it, how he looked when he said it. His cheeks go red as he realizes that he might be close to the deep end.

"I just had dinner with him tonight," he tells her.

Margot's jaw drops. "When'd he get the chance to ask you out?"

Out of some juvenile form of defense, he almost wants to protest that they hadn't *gone out,* but he realizes with a skip of a heartbeat that it very much had been a date.

And he has no reason to pretend to be straight, he thinks. He remembers Margot's arm around the waist of the other girl at the bar —he thinks her name was Alana.

"Last Friday." He wrings his hands together and smiles wryly. "We were supposed to have lunch on Sunday, but I stood him up."

Margot lets out a low whistle and elbows him (and it's not nearly as creepy as Franklyn's nudging had been just a few hours before).

"You were rude and he *still* took you out to dinner? Wow. You must be something special."

Will smiles at that. "He seems to think so."

"Well," Margot huffs, "I tend to value Hannibal's opinion, so I'm going to agree with him." Her eyes drift for a moment to Will's screen, and both of her eyebrows raise. "Graham, huh?"

He nods. "Will Graham."

"Pleasure to meet you," she says. "Margot Verger."

Will recognizes the name; he's heard horror stories about her family. He sees them in her eyes.

They shake hands in a half-awkward sort of way. It feels like Margot's trying to look through him, to peel back his layers figure out what makes him so special.

"I'd ask for your number," she says, getting to her feet, "but I'm afraid Hannibal would be upset that he couldn't acquire it for himself."

"Then don't," Will says. "Give me Hannibal's."

He'd like to arrange another meeting for them without having to go back to the *Uffizi.*

Margot smirks and pulls Hannibal's contact from her phone, writes it down for Will. She drifts out of the library shortly after, and Will logs off of the library computer.

Towards the end of the bus ride back to his apartment, he texts Hannibal.

thanks for the salvaged night. i had a good time

Hannibal responds immediately.

It was my pleasure, Will. Though, I'm wondering how you got my phone number.

The bus stops, and Will gets off. He grips the phone in his pocket as he darts into the building and hurries back up to his apartment. Once he's behind the closed door, he takes a deep breath and types in his response.

i have my ways

Once again, Hannibal's response pings back immediately.

Menacing, Will. Is Franklyn not the only one stalking me?

He swallows the bitter taste that pricks at the back of his throat. He knows it was meant to be teasing, but he doesn't like the insinuation.

nothing like that. your friend margot found me in the library

I'll have to thank her, then. For now, I'll grasp the opportunity her gift has granted and suggest we schedule another date.

Will, still stood in the dark of his apartment, grins like a fool. He wasn't just being hopeful when he thought it felt like a date.

and your suggestion is?

Perhaps we could spend the afternoon together, if you haven't any classes?

Will is about to type an immediate yes, but then he remembers Chilton's email, and how an honest-to-god federal agent wants to see him because he solved a case.

He opens up his calendar app and sees that Chilton has blocked out an entire three hours for him to meet with Jack Crawford. He isn't sure whether he's disappointed by that or not, and lets Hannibal know the deal.

can't. got a big meeting tomorrow, but maybe we can have dinner in the evening?

He isn't sure if he's being too forthcoming, asking for another dinner date.

You can tell me all about your meeting while I cook you dinner. Shall I pick you up from campus?

yeah. try six o'clock?

I look forward to seeing you again.

Will bites his bottom lip and sighs.

night, hannibal

Good night, Will. Sleep well.

He does, but barely.

"What the *hell,* Graham."

Beverly plops down onto the patch of grass next to Will with a scowl. She drops her bookbag on the ground with an equal amount of contempt.

Will looks up from his textbook. "What'd I do this time?"

Beverly scoffs and pulls her thermos from her bag, and takes a long drag of what smells like plain old chamomile tea. She doesn't answer the question, though.

"Oh," Brian says, setting aside his own textbook and leaning forward eagerly. "A distraction. Let's see what Beverly's fake-pissed about this time."

She scowls at him, too.

"Well," Jimmy says, having long since abandoned his studies in favor of some inane game on his cellphone, "we know the culprit is Will. So we just have to figure out the crime."

Will huffs. "Just ask the accuser."

He hasn't told them about his date with Hannibal, or the email from Chilton and his upcoming meeting with Crawford. He doubts it's the source of Beverly's irritation, because there's no way she would have found out.

But there's also nothing else for her to be worked up about.

Jimmy lets out a contemplative *hmmm* and sets down his phone. "Well, let's see. We've been with Will since Gideon's lecture, and so that gives him a solid alibi for those three hours."

"But Beverly was gone for lunch hour, which means she could have found something out from a prior incident," Brian adds.

Will sighs.

"Is this about me missing Ramen Night?"

Jimmy and Brian both make eye contact. A light bulb might as well have popped up over their collective cranium.

"Why *did* you skip out?" hums Brian. He tilts his head, frowning.

"Yeah, Will," Beverly says, speaking up. "Why don't you tell us?"

Her eyebrows are raised, and she's smirking, so Will knows she isn't *actually* upset.

It's when she winks that Will knows he's fucked.

Jimmy registers that and sets his elbows on his knees so he can rest his chin in his hands. He bats his eyelashes. "Yes, Will, *do* tell."

Will sticks out his bottom lip, hoping that if he pouts enough, they'll give him his privacy. He even looks to Brian for sympathy, because why the hell not, but he just gets an intrigued look.

"Will," he says, grinning. "Don't hold out on us. Is this about the hot bartender?"

Jimmy lets out a low wolf whistle, and Beverly slaps her knee when Will groans.

"Spill, Graham," she says. "I don't like getting my information from secondary sources. It makes for bad evidence."

"And say there's none?"

The three of them all boo at him. Jimmy throws his crumpled up notes, and they graze the frames of Will's glasses.

"Fine," he mutters, pushing the glasses back up the bridge of his nose. "I saw Hannibal, yeah. But who told you, Bev? No one else knows about it."

Beverly grins at him. "Then your bartender must like to kiss and tell," she says, "because I overheard a conversation when I was in line to check out my book. I wasn't really listening until they said his name, and I thought to myself, 'How many Hannibals can there be in one school?' And then I heard one tell the other that this Hannibal had a particularly pleasant date and wouldn't shut up about it."

"Margot," Will hisses. "I forgot about her."

"Shame," Beverly says. "She was all over the chance to hear all about you, though. Apparently, you're some kind of enigma."

Jimmy lets out a chortle and leans closer to Brian. "Will *is* a kind of enigma," he points out.

Brian nudges him away, keeping his gaze fixed on Beverly. "Not to us, though. You tell her anything, Bev?"

Will mentally crosses his fingers in the hope that she didn't say something grossly embarrassing.

"Of course not," she says, her lip curling as if she thought the prospect repulsive. "Even if the chick was offering dirt on Hannibal, I wouldn't tell her. We can figure that shit out for ourselves; it's what we're gonna do for a living."

Letting out a relieved sigh, Will smiles at her. "Thanks, Bev."

She punches his shoulder. "No problem, you clam. She did tell me a little about Hannibal, though. Grad student, studying psychology, has got a troubled past—"

"I could have told you that," he interjects with a snort.

Jimmy rocks backward, eyes wide. "Psychology? Will, are you crazy? Don't you have that strict 'shrinks are the devil' thing?"

Brian nods, licking his lips in thought. "You won't see one professionally, but you'll fuck one?"

"No one said anything about fucking!" Will protests, though he feels his ears going red. He could protest that Hannibal isn't a practicing shrink yet, but he has a feeling that the argument would fall on deaf ears.

"Come on, now," Beverly chides.

"Hey," Jimmy says, shrugging, "I just don't want to have to say 'I told you so.'"

"You don't," Will argues, but he knows he has a point.

Somehow, this is gonna bite him in the ass.

Will shows up at Doctor Chilton's office at three o'clock.

It looks stuffy, as usual; the professor's organizational skills can't keep up with his unending pride and greed. Certificates of his own accomplishments line the walls, and his desk is covered with baubles that offer no significant meaning beyond their material value. Will knows; he's asked.

Chilton himself sits behind the desk in a gray flannel suit that clashes with his mauve-and-magenta paisley tie so violently that even Will can pick up on it. But neither the tie nor the professor are Will's primary focus.

A burly, middle-aged man sits in the chair in the corner closest to the door, unable to see him yet, but Chilton's likely alerted the man that Will's arrived, so he pushes open the glass door.

"Hello," he says, shoulders hunched forward, eyes trained on the edge of Chilton's desk. He glances over at the man, the *federal agent,* and offers a brief nod, pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose.

It's best to look as meek as possible in situations such as these, he thinks.

"Mister Graham," Chilton purrs, placing both of his hands on the desktop and offering a grossly polite smile. "I'm so pleased that you decided to join us. Have a seat."

Fighting a scowl, Will glances at the two empty seats in front of Chilton, and then back at the corner seat which Crawford *(Jack Crawford*—the name has been ringing in Will's head for the past hour) has taken.

Crawford raises his eyebrows and nods, as if to say, *Sit down, son.*

So he does, caught between Chilton and Crawford. He angles his chair so he's partially facing the both of them, hands folded in his lap.

"Doctor Chilton," he says, in way of a belated greeting. "Agent Crawford."

The agent offers a small smile. "Will Graham," he says. "Your reputation precedes you, to say the least."

With a wry laugh, Will says, "I'm sure my C-grade has provided an apt impression."

"C-grade?" Crawford's eyebrows shoot up, his gaze redirected to Chilton.

"The class is based off of method, of which Mister Graham supplied very little," Chilton explains hurriedly, looking flustered under Crawford's eye.

It makes Will want to chuckle, but he reigns it in.

Crawford hums, but it's more like a rumble. "Well, Mister Graham," he says, "there were certainly several unexplained *jumps* in your report. I'd like to hear more about them."

"Of course, Agent Crawford." Will shifts his weight, seeking comfort that he knows he won't be able to find. "Doctor Chilton said you were looking for interesting minds. Are you here to poke at mine?" He notices the seating arrangement again, and frowns. "Or is that what Chilton's for? You're just here to watch."

"If you don't mind," Crawford says, but his tone says otherwise. He gives Chilton a strange look, almost like a warning.

Chilton clears his throat. "I have the public case files here," he says, pulling out an innocent manila folder. "If you could show us what you saw in them, Mister Graham."

"I'll show you the uncensored files afterwards," Crawford adds.

Will's willing to run for the carrot at the end of the stick, if only to get it over with. He takes the folder that Chilton slides to him with a slight grimace. Upon opening it, the memories flood in, and he can already feel the killer in the back of his mind, scratching at his skull.

Larry Wells, he reminds himself, thinking of Chilton's email. This man has a name now; he has no place in Will's head.

He flips through the file.

"There are no photos," he remarks.

"Not on the public file, no," Crawford confirms.

"Lounds posted plenty on that blog of hers, though," Will points out. "They were public."

Chilton smirks. "You may enjoy her vile brand of journalism, Mister Graham, but the FBI does not condone it."

Will shrugs and shuts the file. "It got me the photos. They were all I needed to solve the case; I never saw these."

Though he doesn't look over his shoulder at Jack, he can sense the man leaning forward in anticipation. Chilton, too, appears to have a piqued interest, his eyebrows raised at Will.

"Just... the photos?" Chilton asks, blinking.

Will had also taken a cab out to see the long-since cleared out crime scene, but he thinks he'll omit that. He's about to elaborate when he sees Chilton look away from him, and then hears a knock on the door.

"My research assistant," offers Chilton, giving Jack an apologetic glance. He motions for whoever it is to enter.

Will looks over his shoulder to get a glimpse of their intruder, and then realizes that his ass-biting has been delivered.

Hannibal slips into the room, holding a leather-bound notebook to his chest. When he meets Will's eyes, his expression barely changes, hinting at a sly pleasure that Will's pretty sure only he picks up on.

But Will isn't pleased. He turns around sharply and busies himself with flipping the file back open, focusing on anything but Hannibal.

"Hannibal," Chilton says, his tone sharp. "You're late. Didn't you check your Google Calendar?"

"My apologies," he answers, voice as smooth and charming as always. "You must have put it on your personal account. I only just received an email."

"Check next time," the professor sighs, giving Jack a chastened look.

Will bites his lip as Hannibal sits down in the chair next to him, smiling coyly. Ignoring him, Will turns back to the papers, wondering why the *hell* Hannibal hadn't mentioned this sooner.

Didn't Will tell him that he'd be in a meeting?

Then again, Will didn't tell him with whom or for what, so maybe none of this is exactly *Hannibal's* fault. He settles for scowling at Chilton, who doesn't seem to notice.

"Agent Crawford, Will, this is Hannibal Lecter, my assistant. I asked that he sit in and take notes." Chilton looks at Jack again. "For research purposes, of course."

Hannibal offers Will an affable smile. "It was a last-minute arrangement."

"Of course." Will narrows his eyes at him.

Chilton seems oblivious, but Jack regards the both of them carefully.

"Where were we?" the agent asks, redirecting the conversation.

"Will was telling us about how he solved the Grafton case from merely looking at photographs," Chilton reiterates, more for Hannibal's sake.

"Remarkable," Hannibal says. He opens up his notebook to a blank page, and Will watches as he writes out the date in perfect calligraphy.

"And how *did* you form that profile, Will?" Jack asks, apparently content to conduct things from the back.

Will licks his lips and shrugs, now genuinely uncomfortable. Hannibal knows too much about his abilities after their conversation the night before, which means that Will can't exactly beat around the bush or lie about it. He's not sure if he can trust Hannibal to keep his mouth shut, now that he knows his connection with Chilton.

A cold feeling settles in the pit of his stomach as he wonders if Hannibal's interest in him is nothing more than a professional curiosity.

"Deductive reasoning, I suppose," he confesses. "The corpses all obviously varied in freshness. Only one was recent; it was obviously a finale. He wanted his last victim breathing to see his murders concluded, a long chain of events. They were all connected, from the first to the last."

"Yes," Chilton says, resting his elbows on the desk. "You said as much in your report. That doesn't tell us how you came to that conclusion, though."

Hannibal arches an eyebrow, looking at Will curiously.

Will ignores him. "Call it a feeling," he says.

"And a feeling is all that stood between you and our three years of hard investigation?" Crawford demands, nearly bristling.

"Everyone is limited to their skill sets, Agent Crawford," Hannibal cuts in. "Will simply has a skill set that differs from your team's. The ability to identify and analyze feelings is a rare one, indeed." His pen flows across the page, noting something. "Empathy, as desired as it is in our society, is not as common as one might think."

Will glances over his shoulder to see Crawford mulling that over, easily placated by Hannibal's silver tongue. Chilton clears his throat, demanding attention.

"Is that what you did, Will? You empathized with Larry Wells?"

Fanning his hands out on his lap, Will shrugs again. "Not intentionally, but I suppose." He gives Hannibal a subtle dose of side-eye, remembering their conversation from the night before.

You can crawl into a criminal's head.

He seemed so taken with Will, then. It makes sense, now. Will was just another subject to prod at, him and his brilliant mind.

Special, Will thinks to himself, nearly scoffing aloud.

"It's like they crawl into me," Will elaborates, looking again at Hannibal, who's already heard all this. "I saw the picture of that crime scene, and it was like I saw what he meant by it. Like —like looking at a painting, and knowing exactly what they did and what they intended."

Beside him, Hannibal lets out a small sigh and writes *pure empathy* in his beautiful script.

Chilton cocks his head to the side. "Is that how you see it? As art?"

"Wells intended it to be so," Will points out. "I saw what he saw."

"A dangerous thing, that," Chilton says, folding his hands together as he smiles. It looks menacing. "Mister Graham, I would love to monitor you and your tendencies. I think your... empathy disorder, shall we call it, would make for an *extremely* interesting research paper, which I'm sure Hannibal would be happy to assist me with."

Hannibal frowns and picks up his pen, but Crawford interrupts before he can say anything.

"Enough of that, Frederick." The agent lets out a long sigh, his chair creaking as he rises to his feet. He moves to stand next to Will, glancing at him and then Chilton. "Doctor Chilton, would you mind referring Mister Graham to one of your colleagues? As soon as he's had a psych eval, I'd like to see him over at Quantico."

Chilton blinks for a second, apparently confused. "Of course. I would be happy to do the evaluation myself—"

"No," Crawford says. "I'll thank you for introducing me to Will, but I shouldn't need to remind you that our contract grants *me* access to his mind, not you. Frankly, I'm appalled that you brought in your *research assistant* to this confidential meeting."

"Agent Crawford, I—"

Chilton's sputtering is cut off by a sharp glare from Crawford, who places a heavy hand on Will's shoulder.

"Sorry about this, son," he says. "I would have asked to meet with you privately, had I known he was going to take advantage of the situation." He looks up to give Chilton a pointed glare. "Personally, I don't care what makes you able to do what you do, I'm just glad you can do it. I'd like to see it put to use."

Will is unable to help it when his jaw goes slack. He stares up at Crawford in a mixture of confusion and awe. "Excuse me?"

Crawford laughs, and Hannibal seems to smirk at his response, too—though Chilton just glowers.

"I've got a tough case I'd like you to look at," he says. "The FBI could use a consultant like you."

It's as though all of Will's hopes and dreams have been handed to him on a silver plate. He has to take a deep breath. "I don't know what to say," he admits.

"Don't, then," Crawford answers, retracting his hand and checking his watch. "Just give me an answer by Monday. Here's my number." He pulls a standard business card from his coat pocket.

Will takes it and stares at it like it's somehow made of plasma.

"Gentlemen," Crawford says, and exits the room.

Chilton's mouth stays fixed in an O-shape, and Will gets to his feet before he can be cornered by the man.

"See you next week, Professor," he says, and slips out of the office, shutting the glass door behind him. Jack Crawford has already disappeared, nowhere to be seen.

Will idles by the building exit, not sure what he's going to do with himself. Go find his friends and celebrate? They don't even know about the meeting, though.

He considers calling his dad, but he hears footsteps and looks up abruptly. Hannibal is approaching, a contrite expression taut on his features.

"Will," he says, reaching out to touch him.

He shrugs away, pocketing Crawford's business card. "Hannibal."

Hannibal purses his lips and holds his notebook against his chest with both arms. "I believe we had a date tonight," he says, hesitance cracking through his composure.

Will frowns at him, a nervousness boiling beneath his skin. "I don't see why you'd want to bother," he says. "Jack Crawford said you couldn't use me for your research."

"I am not Frederick Chilton," Hannibal returns, his lips tightening into a thin line. "I have never had any intention to study you, Will, though it may come across as such, now."

"Yeah," Will scoffs, looking out a nearby window. "You could have told me you were Chilton's assistant, you know. It would have at least given me some warning."

"It never seemed prudent to tell you," Hannibal replies, his voice soft. If Will had any sort of read on the man, he might dub it remorseful, but it's nigh impossible to tell.

A shame, he thinks, to be blind to the motives of the one person he might benefit from seeing.

"We talked about my studies in depth," Will points out, shaking his head. "Did you know who I was all along? Chilton must have shown you my report."

"I had an inkling," he confesses. To his credit, he certainly *sounds* honest. "I failed to piece it together until I received Chilton's email. At that point, I was too blinded by my enthusiasm to consider the implications of my attendance. It was foolish of me, I admit, but I truly wanted to see you, Will."

Will can't look at him. He continues to stare out the window, unsure of what to think.

"Allow me a chance to prove myself," Hannibal pleads. "It's not often that I grant anyone my repentance. Please, spend the evening with me."

"Repentance isn't ordinarily something *granted,"* Will says, looking up at him. "But I'll take it."

Hannibal smiles, then, a full out beam. "You won't regret this, Will. Neither of us will."

Will rolls his eyes and stuffs his hands into his pockets. "I wouldn't be so sure," he mutters.

But he follows Hannibal out of the building anyway, bitterly aware of the warm thing pulsing inside of him.

Chapter End Notes

GROUP DIALOGUE IS FUCKING HARD AND I HATE IT

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

I know NOTHING about sailing, so I consulted this video to help me figure it out. (thanks, scrooge) Unfortunately, it wasn't what I was looking for, but it *is* hilarious and informative!!

So, disclaimer, I know nothing about sailing and don't have the time to learn. But this chapter needed it.

As always, the places in this story exist solely in my imagination! Even the ones that actually exist, like GW and the marina, are likely not in line with what they're like irl.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"So, where are you taking me, exactly?"

Will has been in Hannibal's car for all of fifteen minutes, and they're already pulling to a stop in a parking lot. Will can see the masts of a collection of sailboats set against the pale blue of the sky.

"I thought we might go sailing," Hannibal says, glancing over at him with a cocked eyebrow as he pulls the key from the ignition. "It would serve as a trust-building exercise."

Moving before Hannibal has the opportunity to play the gentleman again, Will gets his own door, stepping out into the afternoon air that's been warmed by the water. He watches as Hannibal gets out and stretches, lifting his arms high before moving to the back of the car, opening the trunk.

He pulls out a change of clothes, and Will crosses his arms.

"Looks to me like you've planned all this, *Lecter,"* he mutters. He turns to walk towards the water. "Trust building, my ass."

The sound of Hannibal's laughter is followed by the slamming of the Bentley's hood. A moment later, Hannibal is at his side, still smiling at him.

"I promise that the decision to come here was spontaneous," he says. "I have a membership at the sailing club here, so we should be able to borrow a boat with minimal hassle."

"Of course you're a member," Will grumbles. Despite his churlishness, though, he finds himself reveling in the idea of being out on the water.

"Are you not a fan of boats?" Hannibal asks. "I can take us somewhere else, of course."

"No!" Will says, maybe a little too quickly, and glances at Hannibal. "No, it's fine. Boats are... fine."

A self-satisfied smirk plants itself on Hannibal's lips. It makes Will even more hesitant to admit that he's been dying to get out on the water for a while now, so he keeps his mouth shut.

Hannibal takes care of checking out the boat, and Will has to sign a quick release form. In the meantime, Hannibal slips off to change into his clothes and reemerges in a white polo shirt and light blue shorts.

Will swallows his surprise and reminds himself that it would be insane to assume that Hannibal would take his three piece suit out on the water. He quickly looks away, noting that even Hannibal's casual wear is tailored. It looks stupidly good.

"Would you like to change into something else?" Hannibal asks, drawing close to Will's side. "I'm sure they have something available for rent."

His own clothes are perfectly safe to get wet, so he shakes his head. "It's fine. Let's go."

"All right, then."

Hannibal moves to take Will's arm, but he steps away, already heading for the docks.

"Which boat?" he asks.

"Slot 15B," Hannibal answers, keeping up easily. "Do you know how to sail?"

"Vaguely," Will answers, spotting their slot. He hurries for it, a smile threatening to overcome him. He hasn't been on a boat since he saw his father last, and he hasn't been sailing since he was thirteen and his mother tried appealing to his interests.

It hadn't gone well; he'd tipped the thing intentionally, tossing the stuffy instructor Angelique had hired into the water. It was no small feat, either, considering it had a cabin.

This boat is a small dinghy, and the sails are collapsed and tied to the mast. The hull is small enough for both of them to have a few steps worth of space to walk around. He can't help but think it looks like hell to keep balanced. He turns to look at Hannibal over his shoulder. "Do *you* know what you're doing?"

He gets a smug grin in return.

"Like I said," Hannibal hums, smoothly sliding past him and stepping onto the boat, "I have a membership." He leans casually against the mast, offering Will a sly smile.

"Well, then." Will crosses his arms. "I'll let you do most of the work."

Hannibal nods, looking pleased. "I will ensure it's a pleasurable experience for both of us."

"Sure." Will rolls his eyes at the cocky remark. "Need me to untie us?" He kneels down to get at the rope on the closer cleat before Hannibal can answer. The knots have been sloppily done and it takes him less than a minute to free the boat entirely. He clutches both of the ropes, half tempted to push the sailboat away from the dock and see what Hannibal would do.

"Coming?" Hannibal asks, tilting his head. He's still leaned against the mast.

Will doesn't give him a verbal answer, and leaps onto the boat instead, rocking it wildly. He could have stepped on, but he's fueled by the memory of his last sailing trip, the laughter that had bubbled in his chest when he fell into the water and the satisfaction he'd gotten from hearing the instructor wail and call him a hooligan.

They don't tip yet, though. Hannibal stumbles and grips at the mast, eyes narrowing slightly at Will.

"Wait until we're on the open water," he warns.

Will grins at him, glad he understands there's no way they're coming out of this dry. "How do we do this?" he asks.

"The motor will get us out of the marina." Hannibal points to the small outboard motor on the back.

Will's seen better motors on cheap aluminum fishing boats, no more than glorified rowboats. The propeller itself is smaller than his two hands. He gives it a look, and then crouches down to turn it on, tugging on the cord.

It rumbles to life in a matter of seconds, and Will is hit with the familiar scent of gasoline. He takes a deep breath, relishing in the familiarity, which earns him a strange look from Hannibal.

He steers the boat using the stick on the motor. He sits down, and the water is so close that he reaches out to touch it with his free hand. It feels like home. If he closes his eyes and forgets the salt in the air, he's on the water with his dad, steering one of those aluminum fishing boats. He needs to know where he's going, though, so he keeps them open.

He doesn't want to give Hannibal the chance to stare, either. Not that Will's open eyes deter him; he watches him curiously until they're out of the marina. Will doesn't mind the quiet, but when he feels the wind blowing through his hair, he cuts the engine.

Hannibal continues observing him, the barest of smiles on his face.

"I thought I'd be doing the work," he says, offering a hand to Will.

Will takes it, pulling himself to a standing position. He shrugs once he's up. "I guess I forgot to mention that I'm a boat person."

"Apparently," Hannibal returns.

He stares at Will's face openly, anchoring him to the spot. Will doesn't meet his eyes, and while he can't tell what the hell is going through his mind, he can tell that Hannibal is puzzling over something.

"Are we just going to drift here?" Will asks. "Or are you going to let the sails loose?"

Hannibal takes a moment to answer, still lost in thought. Will watches as the breeze fails to muss his hair; he feels compelled to run a hand through it, just to muck it up.

Then, Hannibal turns and starts untying the sails. Will watches as they unfurl, catching the wind almost immediately. He jolts with the boat, and Hannibal catches his arm.

"Now is when you'll need to hold on," he says, letting go of Will and allowing him to steady himself.

The wind isn't that strong, and they move slowly. It's nothing like the competitive sailing that Will's caught glimpses of on TV. They just glide through the water. It's peaceful.

He does let Hannibal do most of the work. He looks as confident here on the water as he has everywhere else. Will wants to know if there's ever a place that Hannibal loses control.

He thinks of the shitty sailing instructor from his earlier youth, and a grin splits his face. The boat is small and rocks easily against his weight. He knows that capsizing is common in vessels of this size.

Hannibal's gaze is focused on the horizon, the water, the smattering of other boats—everywhere but on Will. He takes advantage of that and decides to fake a slip; he's sure he comes across as clumsy enough that it won't be surprising.

In the act of pretending to lose his balance, however, his calf collides with the edge of the boat and he really does stumble. Before he can right himself, he falls sideways, flat onto the cold water that was less a foot beneath him in the first place.

Hannibal, agile bastard that he is, prevents the boat from capsizing and circles around to stop next to Will. His expression is a mixture of amusement and consternation, his eyes crinkling as he looks at Will with the sun behind him.

"I would scold you," he says, "but you seem to have learned your lesson."

Will glares up at him while keeping afloat with some idle kicking. His hair is plastered to his forehead, the rest of him is submerged in the water. Socks and shoes included; his bottom half feels decidedly waterlogged.

He should have taken Hannibal's offer for a change of clothes. He feels like a wet cat.

"Sorry," he answers, and swims closer to the little boat. "Are you gonna help me back on?"

"If you don't try to sabotage my efforts again."

Will grins. "Cross my heart," he promises.

Hannibal doesn't look like he believes him, but he crouches down and offers his hand anyway. Will wastes no time in taking it and yanking him into the water with him.

His fall is more graceful than Will's was; he has a feeling that he let it happen. His grin persists anyway, because now Hannibal is also soaked to the bone, and he looks marginally less in control.

"Are you happy now?" Hannibal sighs, grasping the side of the boat with one hand.

Will nods, certainly satisfied. "You don't look so stuffy anymore."

Nose wrinkling, Hannibal sets himself against the boat as if he plans to get on again. "You've made getting back on much more difficult for the both of us." His shirt sticks to his skin, nearly transparent, as he struggles to pull himself back up. The boat wobbles against him without weight on top to control it.

"What?" Will asks, grabbing Hannibal's arm and tugging it from the boat. "You don't want to swim?"

With a grimace, Hannibal looks at him from over his shoulder. "I hadn't planned on it."

"And I hadn't planned on you attending my meeting today," Will counters, and kicks at him from under the water. "Looks like both of our parades got rained on."

The look Hannibal gives him next could kill a man, but it just makes Will laugh. It's shallow, since the cold has made it harder to breathe. The wind bites at his face, and he bets his cheeks are even brighter than the dusk that's settled on Hannibal's.

"You won't get an apology," he adds, and splashes some water at Hannibal's face to prove a point. "I think this makes us equal."

Hannibal blinks the water out of his eyes and wipes at his face with his free hand. His stare is pointed, and they lock eyes. Will feels pinned down, so he doesn't break the contact. It lasts long enough to feel awkward, and Will bites down hard on his lip and looks away.

"You're quite rude," Hannibal remarks at last.

He hauls himself back onto the boat with the grace of a seal. Still soaked, he sits at the bottom of the hull and looks unusually small.

Will presses against the boat. "You've put up with it so far."

This seems to genuinely surprise Hannibal, and he considers that for a moment before offering Will his hand again.

"We should get back; the windchill is quite disarming."

This time, Will doesn't pull Hannibal down. He gets back on the boat, and they return to the marina with haste.

Sat in Hannibal's car and wrapped in a pile of blankets, Will doesn't bother to ask where they're headed next. Hannibal promised to cook for him the night before, and he doesn't seem like the kind of guy to leave Will sopping wet on the curb.

Hannibal is not soaked. He dried off at the marina and changed into his regular clothes, and looks quite comfortable.

Will, on the other hand, is worried about soiling the luxurious passenger seat of the Bentley. The towel he's sat on is already soaked all the way through, and his hair is dripping on the headrest.

As Hannibal turns up the heat, Will sulks in the realization that he's the proud owner of literally no impulse control.

"Should have thought this all through," he mutters. The towel beneath him squelches against the leather seat as he shifts.

The smirk on Hannibal's face is not entirely unexpected. "It's quite all right," he promises. "I now have the excuse to take you home with me."

Will snorts and looks out the window. Some light traffic has stalled them, but they've been moving fairly quickly. The glint of the water has disappeared behind lines of buildings and trees. "I thought you were planning to either way."

Hannibal lights the turn signal. "But now," he replies, "you're much less likely to refuse."

Will wonders if he's played himself, but can't find it in himself to care. A home-cooked meal sounds surprisingly good right now, and judging by everything that Hannibal's proven to be so far, it will be a well prepared one.

They turn onto a ritzy-looking street Will isn't familiar with, and stop in front of a dark red townhouse. The lawn hasn't yet woken itself and turned green, but a sole young maple has leaves budding all over it. Overall, everything appears very nondescript.

When they get out, the Bentley looks at home parked in the driveway. Will spots a new Audi across the street.

Hannibal leads him up to the doorstep, producing a set of keys with all the grace that Will has grudgingly come to expect from him. He unlocks the door and holds it open, revealing polished wood floors and deep blue walls hung with paintings.

"The bathroom is to your immediate left," Hannibal offers. "I'll find you some dry clothes, and then I'll start with dinner. Feel free to use the shower."

The 'feel free to' sounds more like 'you definitely should,' so Will nods a brief thank you and slips into the bathroom. He closes the door behind him, surrounded by white tiles and a large, opaque shower stall. Thick blue towels hang on a brass rack, and Will drops the wet ones from the marina unceremoniously onto the floor. He peels off his clothes, too, and gets into the shower without much thought.

The knobs look old fashioned, and are apparently on opposite sides, because he accidentally jolts himself with an onslaught of unexpectedly cold water. By the time he's figured the system out and has found a comfortable temperature, he's too relaxed to mind the sound of the bathroom door opening.

Through the tinted glass, Hannibal picks up the wet clothes and towels, his back turned to Will. He exits without a word.

Will takes his time in the shower; the cold of the water seeped through the whole of him, making him ache more than he would have expected. He hasn't swam in a long time, and he feels irrationally exhausted.

The hot water relaxes him and sets him straight. When he gets out, a green sweater and gray slacks wait for him, folded on top of the closed toilet seat. There's a pair of briefs, too, clean and soft to the touch.

He tries not to feel weird about everything as he dries himself off with the plushest towel he's ever touched. He can't remember the last time he used anyone else's towel, or even showered in another person's house.

Everything is a little damp from the steam, but the clothes don't fit too badly. A little big, but the effort is appreciated.

When he steps out into the cool of the main house, Will wonders how much effort Hannibal has really put into him. Too much, it seems like; Will would have given up by now, had their situations been reversed.

And as angry as he is about Hannibal showing up like that out of the blue, he can't really blame him. Their original meeting was coincidental; whether or not Hannibal intentionally came to the meeting without telling Will, it wasn't his fault that the opportunity presented itself in the first place.

He looks around the first floor of the townhouse. It's one room, cozy and close together. It doesn't feel as cramped as it should, but Hannibal appears to have artfully arranged the furniture. A chair sits near the little fireplace, accompanied by a low coffee table. A sofa rests across from that, and the walls are lined with bookshelves. Another, taller table sits by the staircase. An unplayed chess game decorates its top.

Will climbs the stairs and notes the lack of photos on the wall. He doesn't have any because he can't be bothered to decorate, but that clearly isn't the case with Hannibal. Where memories of loved ones might hang, gloomy paintings loom instead.

He finds Hannibal on the second floor, which is almost entirely a kitchen. A small dining table is across from the wall with the sink and the oven, already set with two plates and a strange centerpiece: two orchids sitting in a stone bowl filled with water. River rocks and moss line the outside base of the bowl.

Hannibal is kneading a piece of meat on a cutting board beneath a wide window. The sill is lined with assorted herbs in clashing pots: the rosemary sprouting out of a large clay pot with

yellow spots, the mint popping out from a wine bottle with the top cut off, wide sage leaves fanning out over a ribbed copper container. Their varying idiosyncrasies stand out against the polite order of the rest of the house, but Will finds it charming.

The man himself has changed into yet another pair of clothes (but with bare feet and sleeves rolled up to his elbows) and looks freshly showered, and Will wonders how long he was in the shower for Hannibal to have all this ready. Something is already baking in the oven, though he can't smell its contents yet.

Lit half by the warm ceiling lights and half by the urban sunset beyond the window, Hannibal turns to look at Will. He smiles, looking more genuine and more at home than Will had anticipated.

"I prepared most everything earlier today," he explains, nodding at the oven. "I'm pleased to finally have you, Will."

Will enters the kitchen space and notes the lump of dough baking inside.

"I feel like I'm meeting a different you."

Hannibal turns back to assaulting the meat on the board. Will sees that he's massaging spices into it, the muscles of his exposed forearms flexing as he works.

"There are many facets to one's self," he returns, pressing his palms deep into the raw flesh. "It's a matter of which ones we choose to display that determine our personality."

Will purses his lips and leans against the counter. He looks at Hannibal's profile, the sharp line of his jaw, the softness of his mouth, appreciates it, wonders what lies beneath. "How many facets do I have to find before I meet the real one?" he asks.

Hannibal smiles and pulls a knife from the nearby carving block. "Every part of me is as true as the rest," he answers, and begins slicing the meat, revealing the bright and bloody center of the muscle. "How committed are you to discovering all of them?"

"Forward, are we?" Will mutters, not missing the resulting quirk of Hannibal's mouth. Red collects on the knife as he continues cutting the meat into even chunks. With a sigh, Will answers, "I guess I have to learn more about the ones I've seen so far. What's Hannibal at home like?"

"As you see him."

"Is this home?" Will wonders. There's care put into the decoration, and it shows, but he doesn't think this is all Hannibal could bring to a living space.

The question earns him a raised eyebrow, but Will senses that it's in approval. He watches Hannibal gather the carved meat into his hands and carry it over to the stove-top, where a hot cast iron pan awaits. He drops in the meat, and the oil doesn't pop abrasively. The meat just begins to sizzle compliantly.

"No," Hannibal answers, pulling a bowl of chopped vegetables from seemingly nowhere. Despite all the control that Will has seen, Hannibal looks most powerful in the kitchen. "America continues to challenge me daily. The culture here is different from the ones I am most comfortable in, and I find myself hesitant to settle, or to call it home."

Will nods, considering the accent that lulled him the minute they first met. "Where were you before?"

Hannibal stirs the contents of the pan, filling the air with the scent spice and fat, sharp and sweet. "I earned my undergraduate in France," he says. "In my first year there, I learned how to cook and cut open a dying man."

Will blinks, something pulling tight in his chest. "You what?" he asks, swallowing carefully.

"I had originally planned to become a surgeon," Hannibal answers, not at all sorry for the dramatic open, a smirk playing on his profile. "I had only learned the basic techniques before deciding that I would be better suited to a different kind of life, and switched to studying psychiatry."

Shoulders sagging in something that isn't quite relief, Will folds his arms over his chest. "And what brought you to America?"

"Opportunity," Hannibal answers with a shrug. "Doctor Chilton took interest in a paper I had written and offered me a place as his assistant, and here I am."

"Earning your degree," Will supplies.

"Cooking you dinner," Hannibal adds, and takes another bowl and drizzles its liquid contents over the pan. He stirs it together before turning off the heat, and bends down to check on the bread in the oven. "There's salad marinating in the refrigerator," he tells Will. "Would you take it out and mix it with the the greens by the sink?"

Will does as asked; the salad in the refrigerator is a mixture of vegetables in a thick vinaigrette. He thinks he sees radishes and carrots, but can't be sure. He pours it over the bright green leaves that rest in a stainless steel bowl by the sink, tossing it with the utensils Hannibal had already laid out.

A moment later, Hannibal has plated the meat and the salad and pulled the bread from the oven. He cuts it open carefully, despite its heat, and the loaf steams. Will's mouth waters; he doesn't know when he last had fresh baked bread, but he's pretty sure it was too damn long ago.

Relaxed by the shower, charmed by this Hannibal at home, and just about enamored by the sight of the food in front of him, Will sits down to eat without a drop of apprehension left in him.

Chapter End Notes

Would you, too, like to pan-fry something without the oil splattering? Put a little salt in the pan before oil. You're welcome.

Also, I figured Hannibal is still sorting his shit out, so he doesn't have a full out mansion yet, and he doesn't host a lot of elaborate dinner parties. The townhouse is nice and suits his needs (you bet your ass he has other properties where he's figuring out how to do his murder shit, though), and the dinner is simple enough to satisfy and impress Will, and doesn't require me to google another fancy meal because if there's one thing that makes writing for this fandom difficult it's pretending I know jackshit about meat based food...

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

> Apologies for never updating... y'all know how it is, I'm a busy student and I'm not getting graded for this. But I love it and I'm doing my best to keep up!!
>
> (Seriously, every time I get back to writing or even just rereading this particular fic, I'm like GAH MUST WRITE FOREVER but life intervenes. I really love this one a lot)

The food is good. Will doesn't know how he's ever going to endure another ramen night, now that he's been reacquainted with the joy of a home cooked meal.

Hannibal is content to eat in relative silence, and Will is grateful for it. The bread alone is enough to make him want to swoon, and when he nearly does, he has to refrain from glaring at Hannibal. He surely knows that the way to a student's heart is through his stomach.

Will doesn't think it's a bad thing, all the same.

"You were right," he murmurs, licking his teeth clean from the last bite of meat. "This is better than *The Red Fern*. And this isn't even fancy organ meat."

Hannibal's smile is small, but it reaches his eyes. "I wouldn't lie to you, Will," he says, looking up through his lashes. Not for the first time, the light makes his eyes look red. "I always keep my word."

Setting down his fork, Will laughs and leans back in his chair. He observes Hannibal for a moment: the curve of his shoulders, the delicate grip of his fingers on his utensils, the feathery fringe covering his forehead...

The strange glint of his eyes, a black-out window he can't quite see through.

"I guess I'll just have to believe you," he answers.

Hannibal holds eye contact for a moment, as if having just as much trouble seeing through him. Then, he smiles and ducks his head, setting down his silverware.

"You say that as though you don't trust me."

Will shrugs. "Can you blame me?"

"I don't understand what I've done," Hannibal returns, and quickly gets to his feet. As he gathers up the dishes, he says, "I've been nothing but virtuous, dear Will."

A fair statement, Will supposes. Saving Will's ass after being drugged was certainly virtuous, but he's certain that everything following was motivated. Perhaps not out of professional curiosity as he feared, though.

He doesn't have many qualms about an ulterior motivation, he realizes. Hannibal in getting his pants wouldn't be so terrible.

Hannibal in *his* pants is pleasant enough; Will watches intently as he walks the dishes to the sink and begins scrubbing them clean.

"Somehow, I have trouble considering you *virtuous,"* he confesses.

Hannibal looks over his shoulder, his eyebrows raised in something akin to amusement. "Should I feel offended?"

Will shrugs. "Probably not," he admits, and pushes out his chair to get up and join Hannibal by the sink. "I'm not exactly a pious creature myself."

"Piety was never part of the equation," Hannibal says. His eyes flutter shut as he runs the hot water over his hands, the picture of satisfaction, or the promise of. Somehow, he manages to make dish washing look alluring. "Though no doubt," he adds, "you and I would be sinners in the eye of any common god."

The eye of Will's mind quickly carries him in a new direction, thrusting his thoughts into a cold, deep forest. In the middle of it all: Hannibal, skin slick with an inky coat, his eyes glowing.

"The both of us?" Will centers himself in reality, focuses on the warmth of the kitchen. He leans against the counter and watches for the moment when the light will bloody Hannibal's irises again, hooked on the edge it provides. "You've borne false witness, Hannibal, but what have I done?"

Hannibal reaches for the pan left to cool on the counter; his shoulders roll with the movement. He shrugs, and the movement allows light to catch in his eye. From profile, it looks maroon.

Will swallows down whatever sound is trying to wriggle out of his throat.

"A question I myself would like answered," Hannibal counters, scrubbing intently at the pan with smooth, hypnotic gyrations. "I don't suppose I've earned a confession, though."

With anticipation building in his gut, Will licks his lips.

"Would you like one?"

Hannibal turns his head, sharply.

Forest. Ice. Freshly spilled ink. A breath of fresh air, absorbing the last heat of the ugly creatures that want to take over his head. Will, baptizing himself in what he has only seen through the eyes of others.

Hannibal is there: in the kitchen, in the trees, but Will can't tell how. He blinks, watches words slip off of the other man's lips.

"I would like to know what inspires guilt in such a perfect creature."

Hannibal shuts the water off, then, and sets down the pan. Will shivers, a rush of cold spreading down his back.

"Nothing is perfect," he says, though the words feel futile, like empty pill bottles in the midst of breakdown. "Guilt is natural, easy."

"Perhaps, then," Hannibal says, turning fully to face Will, "you're looking to the wrong god."

It's the light, Will tells himself, that makes Hannibal's eyes go entirely sanguine in that moment, pooled with some holy liquid—burgundy or blood, it makes no difference. Will would drink what Hannibal offered, the cool composure of his eyes lulling him into a quiet, peaceful state.

"You'd have me worship *you,"* he realizes, his breath falling away from him.

He would be benevolent god, surely. This Hannibal, the one outside of Will's head, cannot be so cruel as the one he's beginning to imagine within.

Hannibal's hand, still warm and wet and soapy with dishwater, meets Will's cheek, his thumb stroking over the barely-there evening stubble. Warm, soft, missing the edge of a blade, missing the bite of frost—

"Could you blame me?" he asks, and his breath is hot over Will's face. "To be seen fully and adored in turn, and by one so magnificent..." He shakes his head, a motion so minute that it wouldn't have been noticeable from a distance. "It is so rare, sweet Will, to be known, and rarer still to be kept for it."

Red flags raise in the back of his mind, and his pulse begins to tighten in his neck, but he silences it all and swallows hard. He knows what Hannibal means.

Will's pretty face has never been enough for anyone. Clean or dirty, once they know what's underneath, they break away. Caught in the sangfroid stillness of dark eyes, Will feels anchored.

Rough edges and half-buried thoughts won't lend to isolation here, even though the moment is soft. Hannibal is soft, hard to see, but something burns within.

"No common god," Will concedes. Breathless.

"Nor are you," Hannibal answers. His other hand finds a firm place on the back of Will's neck, and he lets out another puffy breath. Warm. "I would worship you, given the chance," he murmurs.

The implications are heavy, and even with the weight of them, Will manages to raise a hand to Hannibal's chest. To feel, to pull closer, maybe even to push away. He feels light, maybe

even fuzzy, and he tries to tell himself that he won't ruin this.

Hannibal has been nothing but a savior to him, and even though his imagination is demanding sacrifice, Will doesn't want to let that confession loose.

Blood and wine, ink and darkness, all just beyond the smell of baking bread and the silk of Hannibal's shirt.

"Strong words," he says. His throat feels tight.

Hannibal smiles, and if he can see the vision behind Will's eyes, he doesn't mind. "I always keep my word, Will."

Will can't read him, can't see behind his eyes. In this moment, he only knows what *he* wants, and it's delicate and murderous at the same time. He hopes that both are really there.

Hannibal leans in, closes his eyes, and touches his forehead to Will's.

The forest swallows Will whole, and it's as cold and endless as the ocean. He wants to pull Hannibal in with him again, so he presses forward and brings their lips together.

Hannibal kisses him like he's tasting ripe fruit. Tender, quick, hungry, breaking away to swallow what he's bitten off. It's over before Will can really grasp it, but he feels as though something was certainly taken from him.

When Hannibal opens his eyes, Will sees that the red there is gone, placated by his sacrifice.

"Remarkable," he sighs, and drags his fingers into Will's hair.

Something catches in Will's throat—a sigh, maybe, or an affirmation, but it doesn't matter, because he loses all thought to an all-consuming desire to rend. It's different from his vision of the forest, and he can't tell if it's his or Hannibal's, only that it feels as natural as artistic inspiration—

Mine, he thinks, suddenly horrified. *It has to be mine.*

He can't read Hannibal, after all, and Hannibal would never be so *animal*—

He must stiffen, because Hannibal pulls away immediately, though one hand lingers hesitantly on Will's shoulder.

"I have to go," he says. Habit kicks in and he steps back. He has to remove himself from the situation, remove himself from this intrusive thought—

Hannibal's hand drops to his side just as his face falls. It's not a controlled motion, it's natural, but Will tells himself he can't be sure.

"May I drive you?"

Will takes another jerky step backwards. "No," he says, his next breath drying his mouth out. "No, I'll—I'll call a cab."

After a long moment, Hannibal nods.

"Stay safe, dear Will."

By the time Will makes it back to his apartment, he is relatively calm.

He no longer feels inspired to tear limb from limb; the idea leaked slowly out of his head as he practiced his breathing, ignored the music humming from the car stereo, focused on his hands on the grubby car seat.

He feels light-headed, half-empty like he just had a blood panel taken. His fingers tremble as he tries to unlock the door, and when he pushes it open, he's surprised to be met with a fully-lit room.

The last drops of that strange hunger slide out when he steps inside and sees Beverly on his couch. She stands up immediately, and he's overwhelmed by the worry and relief rolling off of her.

"There you are," she says, and rushes forward to pull him into a hug.

He places an awkward hand on her back. "Here I am," he confirms. He's still a bit shaky from it all.

Beverly steps back, gripping him firmly by the shoulders like a concerned parent. "Where were you?" she asks. "We've been texting you all night."

"With Hannibal." Will tries to give her a smile, but it comes out forced, more like a grimace.

Her grip tightens on him. "Oh, *sweetie,"* she mutters. It's less conciliatory and more like an angry mother owl. "Did something happen?"

Will gets the feeling that if Hannibal *had* done something to him, Beverly would try to ensure that he wouldn't live to complete his thesis.

"No," he promises, and shrugs her off. "Hannibal didn't do anything. We just kissed." He crosses his arms over his chest and tries not to think too hard about it.

Beverly purses her lips and wordlessly leads him to the couch. She makes him sit down with a gentle shove, as if she doesn't think he would do it on his own.

"I'll make some tea," she says.

Will just nods. He notes the state of his coffee table, the main evidence that Beverly was here and was stress cleaning. The issues of *Boats Magazine* have been stacked neatly by date, and the amalgamation of dirty coffee cups has disappeared. An old jam jar sits on top of a single coaster, filled with water and stray wilted dandelion.

He smiles at Beverly with as much warmth and gratitude as he can muster when she comes back with tea.

"You only have orange spice," she tells him, "and I don't know if that's because you only like that one kind, or it's all you've bought in the past six months and just haven't touched it."

It's a little bit of both, actually, but he doesn't bother explaining. He takes the mug, which is almost too hot to touch from its brief time in the microwave. He sets it down on the table before it burns him, and Beverly puts a hand on his back.

"Everything okay, champ?"

Will lets out a long, heavy sigh and slumps over so he can lean on her shoulder. "Not sure," he admits. He can't exactly tell her that he spent the latter part of his evening fantasizing about Hannibal naked and bloody in the woods, or that he only scrammed when he felt like he needed to sink his *teeth* into something.

He's never felt anything like that before, not even in someone else's head. Ever since his teenage bout with encephalitis, he's had fleeting thoughts about, and of course a fascination with, brutal deaths, but he's never *felt* like—like *that.*

Beverly doesn't know about any of it, doesn't know about the dead girl he found in the river behind his mother's house, how he had been *so sure* that he'd killed her. She doesn't know about all the people he's imagined dead, imagined rotting, imagined bloody and torn to shreds, and he doesn't want to tell her.

He certainly doesn't want to tell her that, for the first time, he imagined something other than the end result.

Will kissed Hannibal, and all he could think about after was *ripping.* Taking a living body, cutting into it, taking exactly what he deserved—

Killing. Will fantasized about killing, and it wasn't anything as tame as what he was imagining *before* they'd kissed. Even that was a little fucked up, and isn't anything he wants to bring up.

"Tell me about it?" Beverly asks, putting a comforting arm around his shoulder. "You know I got you. You're okay, now."

Will swallows hard and thinks of an easy way to put it.

"I'm fine," he says, "but I'm a little freaked out."

Beverly rubs her hand over his bicep in small circles, soothing him. "Did he say something? *Do* something? If he put a finger on you, Will, I swear to god—"

"I kissed him, Bev," Will repeats. "That's all. I'm just—not used to feeling things." He closes his eyes a flurry of emotions come back, none of them bad. "Like that, I mean. I felt...different, and I freaked out."

"Huh." Beverly shifts so she's given him a little more space, but her arm remains around him. "You mean like... he made you feel *gooey?"*

Visceral is a better word, Will thinks, but *gooey* fits nicely between what he's told her and what he's thinking. He nods and leans forward and takes the mug, which has cooled enough that he can hold it. It's still hot, but the burn is subtle enough to be pleasant as he clutches the drink close to his chest.

"Yeah," he says, and blows at the tea. The steam fogs up his glasses, and he waits a moment for it to clear back up. "I've never felt that kind of... rush before."

Beverly's smile is relieved, but amusement leaks through the creases around her eyes. "You freaked so badly about having feelings for the guy that you just turned tail and came back? Christ, Graham." She shakes her head and collapses further against the back of the sofa. "What happened? Did you give him blue balls?"

Will huffs and the steam completely covers his lenses. "Nothing like that," he says. He lets himself slip into Beverly's view of the situation, and suddenly, it's a lot easier to talk about. He feels lighter. "We were having a very deep conversation, and I kept... thinking about him, I guess. He looked *good* washing the dishes."

Beverly's smile turns into a grin. "I bet."

"Yeah." Will bites his cheek and lets out another heavy breath. "It felt really intense. And then he put a hand on my face, and it was still soapy but it was nice... and I kissed him." He shakes his head. "It was like I went *wild.* I felt so strongly and I had to get out."

"Sounds like you really like him." Beverly squeezes his shoulder and retracts her arm, releasing him. "Think you'll see him again?"

"I hope so. As long as he's not pissed that I left like that."

Looking at it from Beverly's point of view, there's no reason why Will wouldn't want to see Hannibal again. He likes him; he was just overwhelmed.

Looking at it from his own point of view, there's plenty of reasons. Homicidal urges don't exactly lend to mental stability, whether or not Hannibal is the source.

And yet, he still means what he says. He wants to see Hannibal again, if he hasn't totally turned him off.

It's not right, but he sees room for darkness in Hannibal, behind everything that's soft and pleasant about him. It's wrong, he knows it, but it doesn't change the fact that he wants it.

"Well," Beverly laughs, "I'm glad you're okay. Want me to head out so you can sleep, or can we stay up and watch the new Marvel movie on Netflix?"

They stay up until three watching hot actors with magical, scientific powers duel it out on screen. Will laughs at all the poorly comedically timed moments, and Beverly eats the bag of ginger snaps he thought he'd hidden well.

It's Friday night, and Will tells himself he won't have to think about anything until Monday.

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

More fictional places, yay!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will jolts awake on Sunday morning to the screech of his default ringtone. The adrenaline rushing through him is usually reserved for the post-nightmare wee hours, but it's late enough that sunlight filters through his old pink curtains, and he doesn't remember dreaming.

Flashes of red and black, maybe, but that's not really dreaming. It could just be the woozy memories of darkness and the curtains. Some nights, the orange of the city light makes them look nearly maroon.

The night is broken, now, anyway. The ringtone screams into the morning air, still stuffy and hot. His throat feels insufferably dry, and his breath feels fast and ragged.

He clutches his bedsheets and wills the noise to stop, if only so he can calm himself down, but then remembers how strangely exciting his life has been of late and decides he should answer the call.

His phone has fallen off of his nightstand and lying face-up on the floor. Jack Crawford's name flashes on the screen, and Will's heart begins to run even faster. He can hear blood rushing through his ears, but doesn't have the time for worrying.

He almost falls off his bed scrambling to grab the phone before it reaches the next ring, and when he does, he has to reposition himself so he's not hanging off the bed.

Half-propped up on his pillow, neck aching from sleep, and still very panicked, he answers.

"Hello? Agent Crawford?" His mouth is so dry that the words feel stuck on the roof of his mouth.

"Will," Crawford says, too curt and overly familiar. "How fast can you make it to Cooper's Park?"

The name doesn't strike any bells. It's too early, his tongue is tacky, and the damn curtains are too red.

Will sits up fully and rubs at his eyes. "Where?" he asks.

"Cooper's Park," Crawford repeats. "It's a few miles past your campus. We have a crime scene I want you to look at. Can you make it?"

Will, despite and perhaps even for his love of nature, doesn't spend much time at parks. They feel cheap. He can't help but think he could use a real forest right now. The thought of breathing in a morning fog would be enough to make his mouth water, if he had any hydration in his body to spare.

Crawford hums impatiently on the other end, and Will shuts his eyes.

Focus , he tells himself.

He'll have to google the location, but if it's near the school he can take his regular bus line. He turns to look at the clock on his bed stand. His muscles seem to burn with the motion. The clock blinks red back at him.

It reads 9:03, and he isn't sure if he should be glad that he managed to sleep in so late.

"If I hurry, I can catch the nine-twenty bus," he mutters, more to himself than to Crawford. First thing on his list will be a tall glass of water. Or five. He needs to cool himself down.

He throws back his sheets and stands up. Everything aches, everything burns. The outside world is a hazy thought. A lake pools in his mind's eye. A river, a line... When was the last time he went fishing?

"Don't you have a car of your own?" Crawford asks.

Will almost laughs, but he ends up coughing. The dry hurts. Maybe he's sick? It doesn't feel that bad, though. "Don't have a place to park it," he says.

A car doesn't sound bad, though. He could drive away from the noise for a while. Once the traffic's over with, there's trees.

And water. God, he should really get a glass of water.

"Then I'll take care of it," Crawford sighs. "We just need you here, and now."

A couple of days ago, Will would have thought this whole thing was absurd. The FBI, needing *him?*

"I haven't given you an answer yet," he realizes. "You said I had until tomorrow."

Saturday disappeared into a sandpit. He remembers working on essays and drinking flat soda and telling himself he didn't have to worry, yet. Friday night was behind him, and everything else ahead.

Telling himself he won't feel that way again, that he doesn't have urges, that he won't.

Red and black. Inky water, Hannibal's eyes. Things he shouldn't have, things that make him feel dangerous.

"Things changed, son," Crawford tells him, cutting through his thoughts. "I can have a car at your apartment in twenty. Does that sound okay?"

Will shakes away his thoughts. Jack Crawford needs someone with a tastier brain to pick. The FBI needs him.

But for what?

"Sure," he says, and begins the tread towards the bathroom sink. A splash for his face, plenty to drink. "Is this part of the case you wanted me to look at?"

"Only one worth my time."

Will gives himself a second to think before he asks for more details, stepping into the bathroom and turning on the sink. He's only aware of three active serial killers that overlap the D.C. area, and one—

"Oh." He swallows, too dry. The water flows just beyond his fingertips. "You want me to look at the Chesapeake Ripper."

He stares at his reflection, at his craning neck trapping his cell phone between his ear and shoulder.

Red eyes flash back. He closes his.

For a second, all he sees is the swing of the pendulum. Then, he's wrenched into action as he pries open a young woman's chest cavity. Blood pools around his fingers, fresh and cool. She's barely alive, breathing shallowly and staring up at him with open eyes as he removes her internal organs, slick and wet and so, so red. She is caught in a nightmare, and it doesn't end until he places the stone creature inside of her, just heavy enough to crush her unprotected spine, and there she is—

"That's the one," Crawford says, pulling Will back. "The car is on its way. Be ready."

"Of course." Will opens his eyes again, still half-expecting to see the face of a gargoyle staring down at him. All he sees his his own face, completely normal. His eyes are blue. "Need me to bring anything?"

"Just yourself." Someone else murmurs something on the other end of the line. "And skip breakfast," Crawford adds, "just to be safe. Rookies don't always have the strongest stomachs."

He hangs up before Will can admit that he probably would have forgotten to eat anyway.

The hunger he's been feeling recently isn't so satiable. He wonders if it will be a problem at the crime scene, and for the sake of his own sanity, hopes that it doesn't.

He cups his hands under the flow in the sink, ready to quench his thirst.

Cooper's Park is relatively small, compared to the large houses that make up the surrounding neighborhood. Despite what Will might have expected of such a rich area, the park is not fenced and has no closing hours.

That's about to change, Will thinks, considering that it made the park an ideal stage for the Ripper's latest strike.

Yellow tape barrs off most of the park, and a mixture of local police and FBI scuttle across the scene, searching for goodies in the grass. A clump of concerned locals hover at the edge of the tape, standing on their tiptoes to see the gory crime before another official chases them off.

The young agent that drove Will to the scene ushers him past the crowd and through the yellow tape. She hasn't spoken to him yet, but she keeps glancing at him out of the corner of her eye, wondering why the hell *he's* so special. He doesn't blame her.

Jack Crawford materializes from a cluster of agents to stand in front of Will, blocking his view of the actual scene. They're still a ways off, but Will can smell something putrid; some decay has likely been brought on by the building springtime heat.

"Glad you made it," he announces. "Forensics is waiting for you by the table."

Will blinks. "Table?" he asks, and rubs at his eyes, scratching away some sleep sand. He wonders if he looks as bad as he feels.

Crawford steps aside, and Will's escort looks away pointedly. There, situated between two oak trees at the top of the park's gentle slope, is a tall dining table, polished enough that its legs glint in the morning light. It's out of place in the cropped grass, certainly, but it has nothing on the pale, naked form stretched out on top of it.

"Can I take a look?" Will asks. He has to crane his neck to just attempt to make out the body, like a child. He turns back to Crawford and straightens himself.

"By all means. That's why you're here." Crawford turns to look at the young agent. "Cannel, deal with the onlookers. I don't want you upchucking like Pike did."

She gives him a relieved nod and hurries off. Will keeps his gaze trained on Crawford, wondering whether or not he'll take the lead.

"Come on, son," he says, and starts walking up the hill.

Will wonders if he ought to call him 'Jack,' or just tell him to stop calling him ‘son.’ Not only does it make him feel small, but he already has a father, and *he* wouldn't approve of Will being at an honest-to-god crime scene. He was barely fine with Will pursuing criminal justice, but that never really mattered, did it?

It wasn’t Graham money that sent him to school, it was Beaulieu. Not that his mother would be too pleased with him being here.

The sun has begun to soak into Will’s face; his cheeks feel hot. He tells himself that his parents have nothing to be upset about; as far as they know, he’s just here to help catch a serial killer.

He follows Crawford up the hill, his breath seizing as he catches the thought again.

Hell. He’s *just* here to help catch a serial killer.

His unwanted thoughts have nothing to do with it. With anything.

The walk is short, and Will feels time slowing the closer that they get. A stout, older man in a white coat takes photos of the body with taut lips, while his taller, more imposing counterpart crouches down to inspect the table legs. Crawford's hand finds its way onto Will's shoulder, and he shrugs it off when he stops at the end of the table, where the corpse of a young man is spread out, demanding all of his attention.

Pallid in color, it seems to shimmer in the light. Moisture, perhaps. Do dead bodies sweat?

It’s certainly hot enough. He rubs at the back of his neck, where perspiration is beginning to prick at his hairline.

Only the body’s feet don't touch the tabletop, lolling to opposite sides, bony and exposed. A few flies, emboldened by the balmy weather, buzz around the brown eyes that are wide open, staring up at the sky.

The still left hand presses into a neat incision vertically crossing his abdomen, and the right is completely bloodied except for the fingers, which appear licked clean, lying over a parted mouth, blue with the blood loss.

Will is struck with a full-body hunger pang, like he hasn't eaten in days, like he's still in Hannibal's kitchen. He swallows and turns to look at Crawford.

"Have you looked inside him yet?"

Crawford shakes his head.

"We were waiting for you, Mister Graham," the stout man with the camera adds. His voice, while deep, is filled with whimsical intonation. He looks pointedly at Crawford, his lips forming into a disapproving pout.

"Meet Special Agent Gideon," Crawford sighs, waving his hand in indication. "He's forensics. So is Budge." He nods at the tall man, who has risen, neglecting the table in favor of observing Will. "They'll tell you what you need to know."

Budge nods gravely and then turns back to his work. Gideon clears his throat theatrically.

"A clean, expert incision of the lower abdomen—"

Will cuts him off by stepping closer to the table. "Give me a minute," he says. He knows he'll be able to figure out the preliminaries on his own.

"Watch it," Gideon warns, but Crawford shushes him.

"Let him work," he snaps. "I want to see this."

Both forensics agents back away, though it doesn't matter to Will. They have already disappeared. He allows himself to be sucked into the scene and closes his eyes.

The pendulum swings gold, immersing the scene in a bright glory. When it settles, it is night time, and everything unfolds backwards. The incision disappears, the blood returns to the body like a receding tide. It becomes a man again, one who sits up and pushes himself off the table, moving like a puppet to settle himself in the grass. He props himself up against the closer trees, and his head lolls as he watches the table dissemble itself and disappear.

Then, the pendulum swings again.

A small voice, whatever is left of the conscious Will, tells him that shouldn't happen. That hasn't happened since he was a teenager, since he found the Hobbs girl floating in the river behind his house—

And Will sees more, more than photographs could ever show him.

It's still night time, but colorful lights blur the edges of his vision. In front of him, the man on the table walks, fully clothed.

He is not who I have chosen, but he is who I have for tonight.

The man looks over his shoulder. His step falters.

He does not recognize me, but he knows a predator when he sees one. I break into a run before he can and strike the back of his skull. He crumples against the pavement, unconscious but alive. My treasure, my bounty.

Another swing, everything flashing gold again, and Will is somewhere dark and still. The man is bound and gagged, writhing in protest, but there is no one to hear him.

I tie him down so that the cut is clean. From the bottom of his ribs to his navel, I slice him open, exposing his feast to me. I take what I deserve, arrange the rest for later.

Gold again. Will feels like he's slipping into something—

He is too tall, but he is who I have for my table tonight. I lay him out, make him beautiful—

The man on the table sits up and stares Will right in the eyes. He pries himself open, dips his hand inside the open cavity, and dripping with blood, raises his fingers to his mouth.

I will not be the only one whose hunger is satisfied.

Will's eyes open and he staggers backwards, away from the body. Everything is too bright, too loud, and he shields his face in the crook of his elbow. The back of his throat feels dry

again, hurting enough that it might be the beginnings of a sore throat. Maybe one of the agents has a water bottle?

"Son," Crawford says, "what did you see?"

"I'm not your son." Will drops his arm and squints, shakes his head. He needs to ground himself. The swarm of people by the edge of the tape has gotten larger, and more FBI has shown up. He feels their eyes on him from a distance.

Still at the table, Agent Gideon watches him curiously, head tilted to the side. "You look like you've had quite the scare, buddy-boy."

"Abel," Crawford growls, "leave him *be."* He takes one step forward, too far into Will's space. Looming, powerful, dangerous. "What did you see, Will?"

"It's the Ripper," he confirms, and looks back at the body, away from Crawford. "But you've got his profile wrong. He doesn't choose them randomly—or, not normally, at least." He points at the feet. "This wasn't the victim he had planned for."

Budge runs a gloved hand against the grain of the wood, taps the end where the victim's feet protrude. "He's the wrong size."

"Exactly," Will says, relieved that someone else can see it. "Someone like the Ripper strives for perfection. For a scene like this, he would want his victim to *fit."*

Crawford shakes his head. "We've found no connections between his past victims. This one isn't any different. His not 'fitting' is probably just the result of random selection—both the table and our vic."

"No." Will crosses his arms and keeps his gaze moving; he can't bring himself to look at anything specific, now. A headache is building from the heat, and the bright light isn't helping. "He picks them by hand . He probably keeps a list. Whoever he intended to go first wasn't *available."*

Crawford's frown is deep, but doesn't manage to make him look more menacing than usual. "Can you tell me *why* he picks them?" he demands. "Why this one?"

"The Ripper is an aesthete." Will grimaces, more in apprehension than distaste. His lips crack with the expression, dry and stretched too thin. "Everything he's put out either mimics art or sets out to be it. He's made this a feast for the eyes as well as the body." He licks his lips, tastes blood, and shakes his head. He thinks of trophies, the taste of copper on his tongue.

I take what I deserve.

"Why do you say feast?" Crawford's question lacks intonation, coming out as a rumble. He clearly isn't thrilled by what he thinks he's about to hear.

Will bites his lip, taking the bead of blood from the crack in his lip. It feels strangely cool.

"He's hungry, Jack."

But he isn’t. It’s faded out, now. He’s fine. He tells himself that as the headache pounds. Someone has to have water, right? And maybe some aspirin.

Crawford makes a grumbling sound, low in his throat. He narrows his eyes. "Are you suggesting cannibalism?" he demands.

Gideon raises an eyebrow and pats the table. "He's all but put it on a silver platter, Jack. I'm pretty we've got cannibalism." He stares at the body, almost wistful. "Always takes a trophy. Doesn't mean he keeps it."

"We'll have to take it back to the lab to see what he took," Budge cuts in. "I don't want anything spilling out where people can see."

"Agreed." Crawford raises a hand to signal a group of waiting agents and turns back to Will. "Do you have anything else?"

Will shakes his head. He can feel the headache crawling up the back of his skull. The blare of the sun in the cloudless sky and the chatter of everyone at the scene have surpassed 'too much.'

"Then I'll let you go," Crawford says, and pauses. He checks his watch idly and then looks at the crowd. "I've scheduled your psych eval for Tuesday, and there's paperwork you'll need to sign. For now, I'll take your word that you won't be giving out details."

"Of course."

"Agent Cannel will drive you home. Try not to acknowledge the press; I can see Freddie Lounds salivating from here."

Will licks his lips again. He’s too dry for salivation, himself.

Chapter End Notes

As with all things in this AU, some things are shifted. Budge and Gideon are not serial killers, Hannibal is finding his originality early on, all that fun stuff.

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

I'm back! And have written two and a half more chapters! So! Inspiration is back too!

Thank you all so much for reading. If you're still here, hearts for you. If I haven't gotten to your comment, I'm sorry--my inbox had over fifty unread messages and it was very overwhelming. I appreciate all of you!

My life is exponentially better than last time I updated. I have my own apartment, I'm getting a better job very soon, I've made more friends, and my wonderful boyfriend and I just celebrated one very gay year together. Sometimes things just take time, I guess. Life's worth the wait.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"You must be Will Graham."

Freddie Lounds has cornered Will just after his last class of the morning. Everyone else already vacated the hallway in favor of getting lunch; Will stayed behind a few minutes to ask his philosophy professor a few extra questions. He's forgotten them, now, backed against the shut classroom door.

"And you must be the infamous Freddie Lounds," he returns. He keeps his textbook tight against his chest, like a shield. "I heard you got kicked out of the Journalism Club last year. Something about libel, wasn't it?"

Lounds smile is sharp and ingenuine. "I left voluntarily," she corrects, each of her words slow and carefully enunciated. There's only six inches of space between them, and despite her slight frame, Lounds is intimidating. She only has to stand in front of him in order to make him feel trapped. "I refuse to be censored by the school's political agenda," she adds. "Besides, it's given me more time to devote to my *independent* publishing platform."

With a smile that's more like a grimace, Will shoves past her, breaking through her invisible barrier. "It's a *blog,"* he grumbles, more to himself. He knows that she's going to follow him.

"So you *have* heard of it." Lounds' heels click through the hallway as she continues after him, easily keeping pace. "Sounds like my little birdie didn't lie. You stole my photographs and used them to solve the Grafton case.

She tries to let that hang in the air, but he ignores her and shoves the door open. The clouds are out today, but he's still brought a bottle of aspirin with him just in case another headache sets in. He reaches into his coat pocket with a fumbling hand, just to make sure it's there.

Lounds grabs his arm, halting him just before he reaches the stairs. Her grip is tight; her manicured nails feel sharp, even through the canvas of his coat.

"If that's true, Graham," she hisses, "it sounds like you owe me a favor."

Will rips his arm free and turns around to scowl at her. "I didn't *steal* your photos, Lounds. I don't owe you jackshit."

"Don't you?" she asks, folding her arms over her chest. A pair of students pass in front of them on the lawn, and she shoots them a toothy smile. *Nothing to see here.* Then, she turns the focus of her gaze back onto Will, backing him against the edge of the top step. "Without me, you wouldn't have been able to see the Totem Pole. That case wouldn't have been solved." She sticks out her chin and smirks. "You owe me, Graham, so at least tell me how you do it. What's so special about *you* that's got the FBI's calling on a college kid for the Chesapeake Ripper case?"

"You know," Will sighs, "most people here are more into political journalism."

"I find the other brand of psychopath *much* more interesting," she returns, eyebrows arched high. "And I'm sure you do, too, Graham. Now, will you tell me a little more about yourself? Or will I have to put my own investigative skills to use?"

She pulls a recorder out of her pocket for good measure, but doesn't click the button. Will figures it's been running the entire time.

"Just because I'm unofficial doesn't mean I can share information."

"I'm not asking about FBI business," she argues, a bright red smirk smudging her face. "I'm asking about *you."* She jabs the recorder at him. It's supposed to entice him, he thinks.

He rolls his eyes. "Not interested," he says, and turns around to go down the steps.

Lounds remains at the top of the staircase. "What kind of whacko doesn't want exposure?" she calls after him.

Will ignores her taunting. He knows he's won, and tucks his textbook under his arm.

"There's something not right with you," she shouts, despite having ceased her foot chase. "I'll figure it out, Graham, whether or not you want me to."

He scoffs as he hits the bottom step, hopping onto the grass. "Good luck!" he returns.

He's sure she'll need it. He's worked hard to keep his life private, and so far, has succeeded. One nosy wannabe reporter isn't going to change that.

Jimmy's physics lecture is running late, according to the agonized text he sent to the group chat, so they decide to wait for him before they head off campus. The four of them only have morning classes on Mondays, except for Beverly's bi-weekly 'Explorations In Women's

Health' class, so they take the opportunity to do something fun to make up for the early-day drag.

They're sitting on the lawn outside of the building that Jimmy so adamantly insists that he's trapped within. Beverly and Will ignore his third plaintive text, while Brian texts back *pay attention, dipwad.* It pings through to all of their phones.

Beverly is on her back and staring up at the clouds. *"So* glad I won't be doing kegels with Professor Madchen today," she sighs. "But it's an empty joy, you know? Because I'm counting down in dread for next week's class. Some dumb freshman suggested we all try *jade eggs,* and Miss M was *more* than happy to indulge."

Will plants his hands on his knees and glances over nervously at her. "Do I want to know?"

"You don't." Brian groans and lays down next to Beverly, throwing an arm over his eyes. "My little sister gave one to my mom for Channukah. *Really* didn't wanna be there for that conversation."

Beverly wrinkles her nose. "Ewww."

Brian scoffs. "Big sis thought it was a sex toy. Wouldn't stop looking down with her freshly Mormon nose." The way he says "freshly" makes it sound like the peak of the sentence: cold, bitter. "I can't *believe* she actually converted, even after Jedidiah or whatever his fucking name—"

All of their phones ping again. Brian groans, and Beverly doesn't move, so Will pulls his phone out of his pocket to see what Jimmy wants this time.

Except the message isn't from Jimmy. It's an email from Freddie Lounds, and Will's guessing that he's not the only recipient. He scowls. That didn't take her long at all.

He sees the word "scandal" in the heading. Probably because he's just a student.

Brian rolls over onto his side to look at Will. "Is he done yet? Cause my stomach is starting to remind me that I didn't eat breakfast this morning."

He shakes his head and stuffs his phone back in his pocket. "Not yet."

He doesn't want to tell them about Lounds, or Crawford and the Chesapeake Ripper. He has a feeling, though, that they're going to know about it as soon as they open whatever email Lounds just sent them.

It would probably be better to just get it over with, but he doesn't feel like ruining his day with it just yet.

"Where do you want to eat, Brian?" he asks, and settles himself on the grass.

Brian elbows and grins. "Good question. I'm thinking soft pretzels." He turns over to look at Beverly. "What about you, Bev? Pretzels sound good?"

"Not for lunch, you animal," she scoffs. "Maybe later in the day. Let's get some real food, like..."

Will stops listening to them. Something in his brain clicks together as he realizes that he's been withholding a Very Big Development from his friends. He hadn't even thought to tell them about Chilton's email, and was too busy (and overwhelmed) to tell them about Jack Crawford's offer.

And then he went and consulted at a *crime scene.* That's a very big deal to keep from one's friends. He'd certainly want to know if any of them had caught such a big break.

He wonders if he should have told them earlier, if it'll just be worse the longer he keeps it from them.

He sighs, only to be pulled from his gloom by the building doors opening with a loud crash. A stream of haggard students comes through them, bustling and ready to be done. Jimmy comes running out of the throng.

"Hey!" he shouts, a little breathlessly, and jogs the rest of the way over to the spot where they've been waiting for him. Beverly and Brain sit up, and Will waves.

"You made it out alive," Brian laughs.

"Barely," says Jimmy. "Stayed on my phone the whole time." He looks at Will, and his face seems strained. "Did you see the thing Lounds sent out about you?"

Will blanches. Of course, Jimmy saw it. He doesn't even know what it says and he's worried. Who all did she send it to, anyway?

"What thing?" Beverly asks. Concern washes over her face; everyone on campus knows that Freddie Lounds is bad news.

"I haven't seen it yet." Will looks up at him. "Did she send it to the four of us? I heard everyone's phone buzz."

Jimmy shakes his head, rapid fire. He's jittery. "So did I. The entire lecture hall went off--phones buzzing, laptops dinging. She's abusing the all-campus feature again."

Before that can sink in for everyone, Brian cuts in, punching Will on the shoulder. "Hold on a second, Graham!" he says. "What the hell is Freddie Lounds doing writing about you? Did you piss her off or something?"

"Or something," Will tells him. He hopes that's the truth.

Beverly purses her lips. "Isn't sending mass emails exactly what got her kicked off of the school newspaper? When she tried to blackmail those seniors?"

"Yeah," Jimmy says, a bit nervously. "But it was all lies, that time." His eyes go wide and he looks at Will again. "This time, too! I'm sure!"

Will feels himself going clam again, but takes a deep breath. Whatever Lounds has on him, it can't be *that* inflammatory, right? She only talked to him an hour ago, after all.

He presses the notification, and notices the very long list of recipients. All-campus emails were banned after her last stunt, so he's sure she sent it only to a majority. Not that that helps any.

He looks up at Jimmy, who's still standing a few feet away, hands in his pockets. "Is it bad?" he asks him.

A very forced smile forms on Jimmy's mouth. "It's not... terrible?" He squats down so he's at eye level with them. "I mean." He waves a hand awkwardly at Will's phone. "She's just a desperate bitch, Will. Clearly, her blog isn't getting enough hits, so she had to send *this* out to everyone—"

Brian punches Will in the shoulder. "What the hell did you *do,* man?" He scoots closer to Will to look over his shoulder at the email. Beverly joins him.

Squat in front of them, Jimmy's staring at Will with his eyebrows raised to the roof. He looks like he's biting his tongue, like he would speak if only he knew for certain that it was true.

Will decides to drop the news before he scrolls any further and cut the suspense.

"The FBI asked me to consult for them on the Chesapeake Ripper case."

And, simultaneously, the three of them gasp.

Jimmy is the first to open his mouth. "The *who* did *what* now?"

"When the hell did that happen?" Beverly asks, but Will doesn't answer her. The fact that Jimmy doesn't know what he's talking about is... a sign. He's not sure if it's good or bad yet, and scrolls down.

His three friends are all yowling questions at him, and he can feel the curious eyes of passing students boring into him, but he ignores them and focuses on reading the contents of the email, whatever they may be.

From: Freddie Lounds

To: me, Beverly Katz, James Price, Brian Zeller (click to expand list)

Subject: Scandal In Psychology Department!

Dearest readers,

Whether you know who I am or not, you should know that my only goal is to inform people. I speak the truth, and only the truth (whatever former administrators have to say about me). While the subjects on my blog tend to revolve around the world outside this lovely campus of ours, I have a story for you taking place inside of it. That is why I decided to share it with you, directly.

> As I learned last year when I resigned myself from on-campus journalism, this school is full of corruption. You've seen it, haven't you? Some people get away with more than others, get grades they don't deserve, receive better opportunities....
>
> So, let me tell you about Will Graham: teacher's pet. Or, rather: assistant's pet.

Will stops scrolling. Beneath this are photos of him: benign photos, certainly, but Lounds probably twisted them, somehow.

One is taken through the window of Chilton's office. Hannibal is seated next to him, and Chilton's profile is in view. Crawford seems to have been cropped out of the picture. There are papers on the desk.

The next is Will and Hannibal in the hallway, after Crawford had left. In the photo, Hannibal is standing very, very close to Will. Closer than he remembers feeling. He feels his cheeks begin to burn.

And then, Will getting into Hannibal's car. Hannibal's hand on Will's shoulder at the dock, looking *almost* directly at the camera. It's the last photo attached; Will can only imagine the next on Lounds' camera was Hannibal's knowing glare.

He wonders if he recognized her. He wouldn't be surprised if Hannibal had known Lounds was stalking them and hadn't bothered to tell him.

The thought bothers him less than what Lounds is insinuating.

"I didn't read past the pictures," Jimmy says, breaking through the wall of Will's thoughts. "I thought she just meant that you were... you know. Getting false grades, or something. I don't know what I thought."

Will swallows, and scrolls again. It can't be that bad, right?

> First, though, who is Will Graham? To you and me, just an ordinary student. A little strange, perhaps. Quiet. With a little observation, one might begin to notice that there's something... *off* about him, but nothing to concerning.
>
> To Doctor Chilton, resident professor of criminal psychology, Will Graham is "a below average student, but certainly a fascinating study." His grades in Chilton's class have been reflective of that statement, regularly receiving failing grades on written assignments.

"This has to be against school policy," Beverly hisses. "How does she know about your grades?"

Will huffs. "My question is if and how she got an interview with Chilton. I thought he hated her." He remembers how miffed the professor had been when Will had mentioned using her photos.

He supposes, though, that Chilton is enough of an attention whore that he would have agreed to talk to her under the premise that she would spin the story to make it look like he held a

more prominent position in the Ripper case.

"She has to get in trouble for this though," Jimmy says. "Right."

"Didn't last time," Brian points out, glumly.

Will doesn't bother to read the next bit thoroughly—he just scrolls through. The jist of it: Will was flirting with the teacher's assistant to get his grades fudged so he would pass the class. (Untrue, of course. C's are passing; and, besides, he didn't even know Hannibal was Chilton's assistant. He never saw him in class.)

And then, at the end, a twist.

> But that's not all. Graham's interactions have taken him above a mere flunkee—somehow, all of this has gotten him a gig with the FBI. Perhaps his infatuated graduate has connections with the Bureau, or perhaps Chilton's observations led him to realize that Will Graham is actually part killer, and that is what has made his insights valuable.
>
> Either way, Will Graham is consulting on the case of the Chesapeake Ripper: a chilling murderer that readers of my blog will know is high up on the most-wanted list.
>
> What makes him qualified for this duty? Especially if his psychoanalytical skills are as poor as his grades tell us they are? If you have any insights, feel free to respond and send in your theories.
>
> For those of you interested in knowing more about Graham's involvement in the Chesapeake Ripper case, click **here** for the *exclusive* stories and the gruesome crime scene photos.
>
> I look forward to hearing from you all.
>
> --F. Lounds

"Desperate bitch!" Jimmy hisses. He slaps his knee. "Oh, I called it! I fucking called it. She wants more hits for her stupid blog!"

"Well, it must have worked," Brian mutters. "I kind of want to click the link. Crime scene photos always get me going."

Beverly glares at him. "Gross, Brian," she says. "You can do that in private. I think Will's a little shaken."

Will gives her a half smile. "Not clammed yet, at least," he tells the rest of them.

"Well, good," Jimmy says, "because if you went non-verbal on us now, I'd *have* to click that stupid link to figure out what the hell you're doing consulting with the FBI!"

Will looks up and sees the students hovering nearby. Eyes are all on him. He feels tense.

"I'll be happy to tell you," he says, quietly. "Just not here, okay? We can go back to my place and order pizza."

The rest of the group notice the crowd: small and spread out, but all looking at their phones, and then up at Will.

"Sounds good to me," Brian says, and with less enthusiasm than what he usually has for the promise of grease, bread, and cheese.

Chapter End Notes

I really was gonna go out of my way and use photoshop to create a fake g-mail email from Freddie and everything, but then I'd probably end up taking another month to post this and you people have suffered without an update for long enough ;)

Bonus

Beverly pulls open the email Freddy sent out again, this time with a mouthful of three-cheese pizza.

"Damn," she says. "I didn't think Hannibal would be so hot."

The group's tense energy has sense faded; Freddie Lounds is a problem for another day.

Will groans. "Really? This is what we're doing right now?"

"Yeah, Graham," she tells him. "You've been holding out on us! If you're not gonna give me pictures, I'll have to go for Freddie's dirty ones."

"Oooh!" Jimmy exclaims, setting down his glass of tap water on the floor. He crawls over to the couch, where Beverly is spread out. "I didn't see any dirty ones before!"

Beverly rolls her eyes. "Dirty as in dubiously gathered, you perv." She leans off the edge of the couch to show Jimmy the photos, her hair falling upside down. "Besides, I thought Brian was the gross sex one."

Brian, this time, was in the bathroom and was unable to protest.

"Oh, you know," Jimmy chuckles. "You rub off on each other long enough, things start to stick." He winks at Will.

Will groans again, but is ignored.

"He looks so European," Jimmy says, pinching the screen to zoom in on Hannibal's features. "I guess he must me, with a name like Hannibal."

Will decides they'd go ham if he told them he had an accident. He pulls out his laptop and begins working on his next essay for Chilton's class.

In the background, Jimmy and Beverly coo over what a hunk Hannibal is, and Will guesses it's a good thing he's not the only one that thinks so.

End Notes

Update schedule is chaotic but I appreciate y'all for sticking around!!!

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!